

Castanets '84

by Ginnah Howard

At 1 a.m. Route 205 is empty. Del drives. Carla sits in the darkness with the directions to the Nassau County Jail on her lap, ready to switch on the light to tell what bridge, what exit, what lane.

Carla's voice startles the silence. "Just as he goes out the door I remind him, Rudy, be smart. No trouble. Think." She begins to poke around in her purse. She searches her pockets. She starts to grope under the seat.

"What?" Del says.

"Matches."

Del pushes in the lighter.

"Busted," Carla says, the cigarette between her lips, ready.

"Nineteen, and he gets busted at a Dead concert." For a second both of the women are caught in the glow from the lighter's fiery tip. "Del, what if I couldn't have borrowed the money from you to make bail? What if you hadn't been able to drive me? I know this much: His father's coming up with the money for the lawyer."

"Carla, Rudy said they're treating him okay."

"Well, it might be better if they knocked a little sense into him."

Wells Bridge, Franklin, Walton. Everyone is sleeping. They do not see a single car. Carla smokes. Del watches for deer. She knows they come from the side, from nowhere. Both feel the strangeness of being the only ones out in the world. They do not talk. Just the back and forth, back and forth of the windshield wipers. Each worries her own private pain, like a hole in a tooth, touching it again and again, wondering at its size. Roscoe. East. New York - 117 miles. They make the turn onto 17. Still no traffic. Del spreads out a little, pushes back in the seat, flexes her fingers on the wheel. She can be on cruise for a few hours. They float through the night. Every now and then a big truck passes, pulls them as it rumbles by.

From the stillness, Carla speaks, "I figured it out. When God told Eve she's going to be punished by having pain when she brings forth

children, I thought that just meant birth. No, baby. It means this." She spreads her arms to gather all of the distance, everything from her bed a few hours ago in Danford to the Nassau County Jail. And everything before and beyond that.

"Del, if you had known that screwing in the back seat of a Pontiac when you were fourteen..."

"I was not screwing anywhere when I was fourteen. Ronnie Legler was dry humping me in the dark on our living room couch. A Catholic boy who sweated a lot while he was involved in an almost mortal sin. And I was filled with guilt about messing up a beautiful experience and fear that he wouldn't respect me."

"Fucked up," Carla says.

"I kept my clothes on until I was twenty-one. Finally they came off because I was too exhausted to hold on to them any longer."

Carla rolls this around in her brain. Her clothes have been off since eighth grade. Not to say it went well. Mostly she knew crazy people not too far along in the art of living. "Okay. Del, if you had known that getting laid at twenty-one would lead to this," again she gathers the space in her fingers, "would it have made any difference?"

"No," Del says and turns on the radio.

But Carla knows Del's cool "No" to her question is just Del running away to some other room in her mind. Mothers. Motherhood. How? Not like her mother. Carla guesses she loved her mother back then, knows she loves her now, but it's been hard to forgive her for not protecting her and her brothers. But where did she go wrong with Rudy? Hasn't she tried to keep him safe from the world? Right from the start; back when she was seventeen and she and Steve were living crazy, doing anything, that turned up. Staying with a for-sure-insane artist and sleeping in his closet. She remembered when she got her first contraction. She was standing in that six by six room, painting a window on the wall, with Steve asleep almost under her feet.

She nudged him with a toe. "Time my pains," she said.

Steve jumped up like a shot, almost knocked over the blue paint for the sky.

"I haven't got a watch," he said.

"Well, then count because I'm not going to the hospital until I get in a yellow sun and some tree branches and you put up these curtains."

When she got the next contraction, she only had the leaves to do. Steve stood behind her counting and rubbing her back and begging her to go to the emergency room.

"Go call the taxi," she said. "By the time it gets here, I'll be done."

The day she brought Rudy home, the closet looked like a little nursery: peach walls with a big window and curtains covered with fuzzy ducks. He was a beautiful baby, with lots of dark hair and big black eyes. "I'm going to take good care of you," she told him. And she did. Except for that one terrible winter in Oregon. She'd kept him safe. They'd grown up together, and if anyone messed with him, school or street, she had straightened them out. She was not like her mother. But now Steve's living in Utica with someone else and her first born is in jail. What had all her fierce protection come to?

And Del knows her quick 'No' to Carla's "would it have made any difference?" is not the way it is. Knows her instant negative is a way to close the lid. She's already crammed all that stuff in a box labeled *Mother Love No Matter What*. Anyway we can't do things differently. No point looking back.

But lately, at forty-five, she almost wonders. Driving to school last June, end of the year, 1. 2. 3. on her mind. Up ahead she saw two robins standing in the road. She knew the birds would fly up and away when the car got a little closer. The car came up on them, she started to brake, she saw a small foot raised in the air to take the next step. She saw what they were: babies, dumb baby robins, with half-ready breast feathers, walking across the road. They flew up just as the car reached them. She heard the soft thud of their bodies. In the rearview mirror she saw two small heaps on the black road. She thought of the thousands of up and down trips the mother

robin made. Tears. By the time she drove up the hill to school, *15 mph Children Crossing*, she was sobbing. She sat in the parking lot, her arms folded across the wheel, her forehead resting on the backs of her hands, and cried like she had not cried for years. Cried for her children. For herself. The inexorable guilt.

But mostly for Mark. Her son. When he was little, his sharp shoulders, his raised pointed chin, always sticking out just enough to register his complaint. Mark, refusing to go mum on the periphery of his father's silence. Once Lee snatched him by the arm, lifted him from his seat to dangle above the refused scrambled eggs while she stood paralyzed and mute, while his brother stared into his plate. The rest of the silent breakfast Mark ate the cold eggs with his left hand, his thin white arm, as though disconnected from his body, motionless on the blue plastic cloth, the five red marks turned toward them. Mark, the rough spot in the family. The place they couldn't slide over. He kept making them see: This is happening; this is happening. She repaid him with anger.

That winter when Mark was five, they had moved to the tiny apartment in Marwick after she had gathered enough energy to leave Lee the first time. Gathered from the despair of two or three binges running into each other as regularly as Friday night paychecks enough fight to pack up what she and Aaron and Mark needed. To carry the boxes up the stairs, trip after trip, to unload in the dark furnished rooms. Mark's cries woke her every night. Exhausted from hard days at school and late nights of marking papers, she groped her way to his room. She would not turn on the light.

He would be sitting in his wet bed. His pajamas, his sheets, often even the blankets soaked. She would not speak. She would lift the child from the bed and stand him on the linoleum. In the dark she would yank off the clammy bedding, wipe the rubber cover. She would carry the wet bundle to freeze on the back porch and go into the bathroom for sheets. Finally she would pull off his wet clothes and maneuver him into another pair of pajamas. She would place him back in the bed and leave the room. Often in a few hours

Mark's crying would wake her again. Again she would stumble to the little dark bedroom. The child, the bed, wet once more. She never yelled at him, but each snap of his pajamas was an accusation.

Now Mark calls collect from a pay phone. He has lots of credit: his father's suicide, the way his own mother lifted him from the bed.

I've just been mugged.

I'm in Port Authority and I have no place to sleep.

I don't want to be anywhere anymore.

He means, You are responsible for me.

Some days she can answer, I'm sorry. But you have to take charge of your own life. Other days she gets so frightened she unplugs the phone.

Carla and Del going down Route 17 in the middle of a rainy November night, trying to find their way. Del drives and Carla peers through the darkness. Out the black window, Carla sees colonies of weathered bungalows closed for the winter. The sign says *Liberty Next Exit*. The radio plays a soft fuzz in the night. She turns to Del, senses she's crying. Carla leans toward her. "Are you all right?"

Del snuffles, laughs. "Have you got a tissue?"

Carla searches, pulls out some Kleenex. "Do you want to tell me?"

"Oh...just thinking," she blows her nose, "how it's so not like I thought it would be $\frac{3}{4}$ all of us decorating the tree on Christmas Eve, singing carols and joking around while we string popcorn."

"So you don't want to talk about it?"

"I feel okay now. What I want is a cup of coffee. Where are we? What time is it?" She hands Carla her watch, realizes she has been on automatic for a while. She rolls her shoulders, stretches her legs.

Carla switches on the light. "2:30." She pours Del coffee from the thermos between them. "The last sign said 'Liberty.' I'm almost out of cigarettes."

"There's a diner just beyond Middletown, not too far. We can stop there." Del notices it isn't raining, turns off the wipers.

"I was thinking about mothers," says Carla. "Bringing up kids."

Del turns from the wheel slightly, catches Carla's eyes, laughs again. "Jeez, Carla. Maybe it'd be more comforting to sink into a father topic: inflation or the hostages, how much gas mileage I get with my car?"

"Yeah, right. Really, I was thinking about my mother." Del turns off the radio. "About how pissed I am. I wish one of those times when my father came at her, she'd a gun ready and as she backed out the door with us right behind her, she'd said, No more, you bastard, no more. And that we'd got in the car and driven away forever. I used to wish she blew him away, but since he died...I don't know. Maybe it doesn't matter as much. It's not like I've forgotten, but well...what a couple of sad cases, my parents." Carla reaches over and turns the radio back on, tunes in a station.

"Rock 107 where the music is right all night. How are you doing out there, you strange people?"

"Great," Carla says to the radio. "Jim Dandy." She flicks on the light for a minute, glances down at herself, over at Del and puts them back into darkness. She reaches in her bag and pulls out a brush. "We look pretty bummed. Living proof of parental neglect." She attacks her hair, wild black curls that refuse authority. She tucks in her shirt. "What's that you're wearing?"

Del has on a long underwear top that she sleeps in and jeans. The back of the cabin is cold and damp in November. The wood stove doesn't do much in the bedroom. Over that she has on one of Richard's wool shirts. It was there on the hook by the door when she rushed out at twelve. Rushed out to get Rudy's message to Carla: Rudy's being held at the Nassau jail; he tried to call, but the phone company said your phone was disconnected. Please come and bring at least five hundred for a bail bondsman. Del checks her clothes. "Don't worry I've got something else for when we see the police."

"So if it's 2:30 now, what time you think we'll get to Mineola?"

Del figures with her fingers on the wheel: 12:30 to 1:30... "Probably get there around 5:30 or 6." She pushes the car to 65 mph just thinking about what the Cross Bronx will be like at 6:30.

She's never done that kind of driving. She's only been a passenger in rush hour and the only way she's dealt with even being in a car that was doing 60, five feet behind another car, in the middle of four solid lanes, with suicidal maniacs weaving in and out, plus horns and occasional obscenities, was to close her eyes, fold her hands in her lap, and center on breathing regularly.

She's felt mostly okay up until now. Since Roscoe, the only evidence of another world beyond this highway is an occasional glimpse of a little side road snaking its way through a break in the scrubby oaks. Otherwise it has been just Carla, Del, and the truckers, and many of them are asleep in their semi's, lined up in the rest stops, their engines running, the cabs outlined by lights.

Now suddenly they hit signs of civilization: Arthur Glick Truck Sales, Monticello Racetrack with a moving neon sign³/₄a sulky driver whips the horse on and on and on. Carla lights up her last cigarette, wads the package and throws it in her purse, "I'm ready to get out, walk around for a minute, pee."

"It's coming right up, but we can only stay a few minutes. We have to get to the Cross Bronx before it starts pounding."

Just beyond Middletown, The Quick Way Diner appears. Del pulls in front of the seen-better-days Quonset and they fold out. Like leaving a dark movie, nothing is quite real. They go in. It is exactly as they knew it would be: the chrome, the Formica, the fluorescent lights. Behind the counter, leaning against the cooler, the plump old gal waitress who does understand. The tired truckers, drinking it black out of heavy cups banded with blue. Even the one lone piece of lemon pie under a scratched plastic cover³/₄the meringue shrinking from crayon yellow cream, beads of egg white sweat on its stiff tan swirls .

The only thing out of place is a young girl who sits at the far end of the counter. Carla and Del both register her: maybe sixteen, punk, a disheveled Mohican growing out maroon, black everything³/₄leather, boots, pants, eyeliner³/₄except for a white satin scarf that wraps round her neck and furls down her back. Carla and Del go into the bathroom. When they come out, the girl is gone.

They are relieved. Carla gets cigarettes and a can of coke; Del, milk. Five minutes and they are back in the car.

"Do you have the directions?" Del asks.

Carla lifts them from the dashboard and places them back in her lap. "Yep."

"Well, start getting ready to navigate. It's going to be tricky real soon." Del pulls out onto 17. Neither of them mentions the girl in the diner. It is busier now.

NEW YORK THRUWAY - Toll Booths 1 mile.

Just the sign is enough to trigger a reaction in Del's body: sweat on her palms, pulsing on either side of her throat, saliva gone, a rock wedged under her ribs. She sits up straight and turns off the radio. It's a switch from one place to another.

"What's up?" Carla says, leaning forward.

"Nothing. I see a Thruway sign and my brain broadcasts emergency to my entire body." Del takes slow, regular breaths.

"Do you want me to try and drive?"

"No, it's better I do it."

And then off to the right, standing with her thumb out, the girl from the diner. Carla looks at Del, her eyes straight ahead, hands at 10 and 2 on the wheel. Though Carla already knows, she says to Del, "What do you think?"

"I think I am close enough to freaking as is." Del slows. They pass the girl.

"Karma," Carla says.

"Yeah, but what kind?" She thinks of Mark and pulls over. They see the girl running for the car. "Tell her I'm going to get in that middle lane and stay there. I can't let her out except where I feel comfortable stopping."

Carla rolls down the window as the girl comes even with the car. "Where you headed?" Carla hollers above the sound of a passing truck.

"Anywhere," the girl answers.

"We're going to Mineola. We can't let you out except when there isn't much traffic and it's easy to get off."

The girl opens the back door and gets in. Carla moves around in the seat so she can really see this kid. "Do you understand that?" she says.

"Yeah."

Del moves out on the highway. "Give me some change. I don't think it's a ticket."

Carla hands her some quarters. She has a fistful ready. They pull into a booth and Del drops 75 cents in the basket. The green light goes on.

NEW YORK - 40 miles

This is it. The traffic is different. Steady. Lots of out of state cars. New cars. Food trucks and milk tanks going to feed the city. Del feels the pressure to get up to 60, to stay there. Otherwise she becomes an island in the moving river. When she feels she can do two things at once, drive and speak, with her eyes still riveted to road she says, "What time is it?"

"4:15. How are you doing?"

"Okay. Now turn on the light for a minute and just give me a quick rundown of the directions."

Lights. Carla smiles at the girl, but gets no response. Then she studies the paper for a minute. "Okay, we're going to go across the Tappan Zee Bridge, that will take us to Yonkers where the thruway turns into the Major Deegan. Then we take the Cross Bronx Expressway..."

Del interrupts, "Bad idea. You can turn off the lights. I know the Tappan Zee's next. After we cross there, just tell me the one that comes after that."

From the darkness a voice speaks, "I know the way to Mineola. I can tell you ahead of time when we're coming to those points, tell you what lanes, and when you have to get over."

"No shit," Carla says, laughing.

"No shit," the girl responds.

Del's body gives a little.

"What's your name?" says Carla.

"Janice."

"Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"Nothing like that," she says and looks out the window.

Carla sees this, but she holds the connection a little longer.

"We're on our way to the Nassau County Jail. My son just got busted at a Dead concert."

Janice still looks out the window. "I know the way. I'll tell you in plenty of time," is all she says.

And that's the way it is. They cross the Tappan Zee where the road dips them down low into a cement trough, with Yonkers rising above them. Still in this trough, they hit the Cross Bronx. The traffic is pounding now with the concrete wall one foot from her fender. Del grips the wheel and keeps the car at the same speed as everybody else, saying over and over in her head, *godhelpme godhelpme*. They streak by miles and miles of trash: fast food cups boxes bags sodden newspapers an old athletic sweater a black lace slip. Janice does what she says; she knows it cold. Finally, at the Throgs Neck, they break free, rise up from below, see the lights of the city. The traffic thins and Del breathes. Then east on the L.I.E.

"This'll be good," Janice says. "I'll get off anywhere along here that you can pull over."

Carla and Del look out to the "anywhere along here." There is nothing but dark and highway and sleeping houses across a gully.

"You just stay in this lane. Mineola's the next right."

"You need money?" Carla says.

"No."

Del sees a pull-in, checks the rear, and swings over. There's a flash of satin, the jingle of jewelry. As Janice opens the door, Del reaches to touch her sleeve, but doesn't. "Thank you, Janice," she says.

The girl steps out and then leans back in a little. To Carla she says, "Your son'll be okay. It's a big bust. Probably a Nassau narc in tie-dye says, 'Got a hit.' A setup, makes a lot of money for the county. He'll get a fine, but that's all that's going down." To Del she says, "Be easy," and smiles. She closes the door.

They watch her jump the guard rail, watch the white scarf disappear down the slope. They sit for a moment, let go. Del moves the car back on the road.

"Well, she sure knows the way to Mineola," says Del.

"She knows a lot, but she doesn't know the way," Carla's hands gather the spaces again, "she doesn't know the way from Mineola to where we are."

And they can't tell her.

"Okay. Are you ready for this one?" Carla says.

Del giggles. "I'm ready."

"Could you be sixteen again?"

"Well. At last. Finally you give me one I can do." Definitive and eloquent. Just tell sixteen to sashay her sweet can in here so I can look her in her pale blues. Say to her what I say to you. Could I, would I, be sixteen again? And Del looks at Carla. "No, Baby. No."

Carla whoops and bounces in her seat. She lifts her arms above her head and makes castanets of her fingers. "No, Baby, no. No, Baby, no," she sings.

