

Circling '84

by Ginnah Howard

Other things are on my mind when the Tupperware lady says, "First, let's move your couch over by the door and the table here."

Before her words reach my brain, she's got one end of that maroon monster, a cast-off from Steve's mother, waist high and swinging away from the wall. Vaguely I register the crap underneath: a package of zig-zags, a pizza crust, a dried puddle of something.

"Get under it good," she directs.

And just like that, I've got the other end up. I believe in those mothers who lift cars to free trapped children.

"You know," she says, as she backs me toward the corner, "a successful Tupperware party doesn't just happen; it has to be orchestrated."

This is what they all keep telling me: all those teachers all those years, the judge, last week. Like it can all be organized into an outline:

I. Get Straight

A. Your Drawers

B. Your Life

"Okay," the Tupperware lady says, "put it down right there."

As I'm trying to remember what comes next: *I.* or *a.*, she says, "While you get the vacuum, I'll start clearing the records off the table. They'll be here in an hour."

a. Radically change

1. Do what other mothers do

It's this kind of outline thinking that got me into having a Tupperware party in the first place. Me, Carla Morletti, once a distinguished member of the Pagans Motorcycle Women's Auxiliary, taking directions from this middle-class matron in a flowered shirtwaist in my own living room.

From the closet where I'm searching for the end piece of the vacuum and sorting through the events that brought me to this

moment, Madeline, that's the Tupperware lady's name, calls through the distance, "Mrs. Morletti, I'll bet you went to Woodstock."

Imagine the numbers needed to go back that far. *XXX* No. Surely the recent past is enough to explain why I'm in this closet and the Tupperware lady is in my life:

I. Get Straight

I. Recent Events Leading to T. P.

A. Plumbing

B. The Other Woman

C. The Gun

D. PINS Hearing

Again the distant voice, "Mrs. Morletti, where are you?"

I resist yelling, I don't know. The silhouette of Madeline's life flashes before me: a neat staircase of Roman numerals.

But for me it always happened all at once, fast. Plumbing. A few weeks ago I was on my back underneath the sink, trying to get into the trap, when it came to me: Another Woman. The reason for Steve's distance. My leavemealone leavemealone of the last few months about to pay off in big time pain. I was just getting my breath after that bulletin when the front door started banging. A stranger. Only strangers go to that door.

I yelled to my daughter, "Tess, see who's out front." She made no response, as usual, so I struggled from under the sink. Out the front window I saw a state trooper car; out the back I saw Tess headed into the woods. Bang. Bang. What now?

The trooper eyed the wrench in my hand like it was loaded. "Mrs. Morletti?" he said.

I thought of Steve's marijuana plants blinking neon, a tropical bright yellow-green, on the window seat.

"Is your daughter Teresa here?" the trooper asked.

Madeline reaches around from behind me and retrieves the vacuum brush from under a boot. "Here it is," she says, handing me the hose while she juggles the canister. "As soon as we get the

Tupperware out of the car and displayed, we have to set up the games." She gives me a you-can-do-it smile and heads back to the living room, me attached to her by the cord. Should I tell her she has lipstick on her tooth?

I fill in Madeline's life: tie-backs, dresser scarves, a Betty Crocker kitchen and a polyester husband. No policemen at her door. The trooper at mine told me that someone saw Tess leaving Dutton's trailer a few hours earlier. Dutton reported a pistol missing from a bedroom drawer.

We found the pistol in the weeds not far from where we found Tess, her body curled into Steve's leather jacket, my bread knife tied to her waist. "Why? Why would you do such a thing?" I asked, trying to pry her arms away from her face.

She tightened, became even smaller. Then it came to me. "Rambo. Are you Rambo?" I said.

I picked her up, her tensed body weighted down with Steve's jacket. The trooper helped me rise and steady. "It's going to be all right," I whispered into the darkness where she hid.

She uncurled against me, her wiry head emerged from the jacket. "I didn't mean to be bad," she cried.

"We need more chairs," Madeline says, starting for the kitchen. "How many definites are coming? You know day parties are not recommended."

I've thought of all that. My neighbors do the night shift so they don't have to pay a sitter or they're on unemployment or they've never worked. I count: Mrs. Dutton, Mrs. Johnson, Mrs. Washburn and her three daughters. Not the woman who lives in the cabin. But down on the next road, every single woman. A few of my friends. You're kidding, they said. A what kind of party? Please come, I told them. And act normal. I'm reorganizing and I want the firemen's auxiliary and the Presbyterian church to know it.

"Twelve. Twelve definites."

"Oh, that's a nice number," she says.

The judge said, Mrs. Morletti, unless Teresa's behavior improves significantly, it may be necessary to place her in foster care. But of course I knew he meant Steve and me, unless our behavior improved significantly; I knew PINS really meant Parents in Need of Supervision.

The interior of Madeline's station wagon is not quite what I expected, doesn't quite fit my outline for her. I'm expecting immaculate, and what we've got is marginal, heading toward the edge. A bag of returnables, something yellow staining the back seat, and a pile of *Good Housekeeping* magazines. On the bumper there's a ripped sticker; only half of its message remaining: *ife?* I can no longer guess what it said. Still her car's a couple circles above the Pinto, but coming soon to one of those decisive forks in the road.

The Pinto. It's so much in our yard with the hood up that even though I cajoled Steve into pushing it into the barn in preparation for this party, I still see it like negative space in front of the grandfather maple. Loss. Like when someone goes and isn't in the places where they used to be.

Madeline puts out her arms. Her fingernails are bitten, red, chewed down as far as you can go. If this keeps up, I'm going to have to revise my idea of Madeline.

"Just stack the boxes on top," she says. "Tupperware is light. But very durable. Keep piling them up," she says. "Between the two of us we can make it in one trip."

And what a long strange trip it's been to me following Madeline's straight back down this path. But it isn't a straight path. I don't outline; I spiral. Circling, circling. A slinky. Being pulled, finally lifting into another place when the weight becomes great enough.

Steve should see me now, a bag of Tupperware party favors in either hand.

He said, There is no other woman. What would I want with another woman? My life's complicated enough already. But I don't

believe him. Whenever I look in his eyes for truth, I see myself, falling through dark space, groping for a ripcord that isn't there.

Madeline starts unpacking the Tupperware onto the table. Green, pink, blue. Big, small, tall, thin.

"What's this weird one here for?" I say.

"That's for pretzels."

"And this?"

"A patty shaper."

I point to a thick green one.

"To grate and store."

I am glad I decided to do this party straight; otherwise I'd think I was hallucinating.

Behind the display, Madeline looks across the living room as though speaking to an audience. "No matter what you want to save and keep fresh, there's an appropriate piece of Tupperware," she says.

For a second the stack of pastel vessels glows, caught in a passing ray of September sun.

"Ahhh, I see," I whisper.

Madeline takes a crumpled yellow sheet from her pocket and spreads it out flat on top of the Tupperware pyramid. She looks at her watch and takes in a big gulp of air. "My notes," she says.

"Forty minutes and we'll be putting this show on the road."

"Right," I say. I can see she wants more, but I don't know what to give her. I notice the paper is trembling.

Madeline looks me full in the eye. "I've got a confession to make," she says, and she draws herself up. "This is my first Tupperware demonstration." Then she looks down at the floor.

If she wasn't behind that mound of containers, I know I could give her a pat or something, but from where I am, I can't quite reach her. I hear a distant rumble. It grows louder and splutters to silence just outside where Madeline and I are standing. Madeline moves a closer.

"What's that?" she says.

"My husband," I tell her. "And he's parking his Harley in the front yard."

We square our shoulders. "Things don't always go as planned," she says.

The back door bangs open and an angry voice fills the house and starts toward us. "That cocksucker. He's lucky I didn't take him by the throat. Carla," he bellows.

He has had a fight with his boss. Enter Steve. I see him through Madeline's eyes. Dark. Hairy. Tattooed.

For a second she's a small creature caught; then a look of calm determination takes over her face. Like an underwater swimmer, she pushes through the space between them. The Tupperware Party will go on as arranged. "Mr. Morletti, I'm Madeline Lowry, the Tupperware Demonstrator. Your wife and I are just setting up for the party. Perhaps you'd like to join the preparations. The ladies will be here soon."

Somehow she has gotten hold of Steve's hand and is shaking it slowly up and down. His body softens, his eyes laugh. "Pleased to meet you," he says.

Madeline lets go of his hand and gestures toward the window. "Mr. Morletti," she falters.

"Steve," he says. He takes off his cap and gives his ponytail a tug. "My bike," he says. "You'd like me to move my bike." And he's out the front door.

II. Eighteen years of marriage.

A. Surprises

"What a nice man," Madeline says. She beckons me toward the kitchen. I follow.

Steve's a painter. Houses, bridges, church ceilings. He can climb to the top of anything and go out on the ledge. He can look down. Even when he calls the foreman names and walks off the job, they always take him back because he will go where no one else will. But he doesn't talk and he doesn't listen.

Madeline surveys what I have laid out for the fancy dessert part of the party. Cherries Jubilee. "Good, you got diet soda and Sweet and Low. That's important."

"I followed the list of suggestions to the letter," I say.

"That is the least risky approach."

Approach. I feel I've been circling for hours, years, and have just gotten the message to make an instrument landing.

The judge said, Teresa is to behave on the school bus. She is to use no profane language. She is to enter the building by 8:30. She is not to leave school. She is to do what she is told to do when she is told to do it. Do you understand? Yes, we said.

I start a pot of coffee. Madeline begins to lay out the favors on a tray. "Let's go through the order of things. First, after every one arrives and gets seated, we'll play the name game."

"The name game?"

Steve's bike roars by on its way to the barn.

"I've never ridden on a motorcycle before," Madeline says.

"He'd probably be pleased to take you for a spin."

Madeline giggles. She refocuses. She turns the favors, twenty pastel plastic bottle stoppers, all in the same direction. "The name game is an icebreaker. We go around the room and each person picks an adjective, a word to describe themselves that begins with the same letter as their name. Like Sincere Sara or Nice Nora. M's are hard. I always have trouble with a good M word that feels like me.

Captivating Carla. Cagey Carla. Careless. Contrite.

Steve comes in the back with a case of Budweiser. "How about a beer? Loosen you up for the party."

"No, thank you," Madeline says.

"Give everybody a couple at the beginning; you'd sell a lot more."

"Steve," I say. Seductive. Self-centered. Secretive.

"Only kidding." Again he takes off his cap. He bows slightly.

"Really," he says, "do you need any help?"

Madeline is gone; she would eat out of his hand. Isn't there anyone normal left? Where am I to find a role model for the new me?

"You could put all the items in that bag out on the other tray."

Steve lifts the bag and dumps the contents into a mound.

"Now spread them out."

Steve looks puzzled.

"It's another icebreaker game. Everyone gets to look at the tray for ten seconds. Then you cover it back up and the person who remembers the most gets a Tippy cup."

"A what?" I ask.

Steve has put both hands over the mounds. Steve has good hands, pliant, the fingers long and sure. "A stopper. A green plastic stirrer. A whatsit with a little purple strap, a ..."

"Steve."

I hear the front door creak and soft footsteps sneaking up the stairs. I know it is Tess. She has left school two hours early. She has not done what she was told to do when she was told to do it.

"No, no, no," I shriek to the ceiling.

Madeline looks alarmed.

"My daughter has run away from school. The school will be calling any minute to inform me that she has been suspended for leaving without permission and that she cannot return until I go in with her for a conference in which I must promise, in no uncertain terms, that Tess will never misbehave again."

Madeline touches my arm. "I have children," she says. "How old is Tess?"

"Ten," Steve says. "She's only ten."

"I just can't deal with it right now," I tell them.

Madeline looks at Steve. He finishes spreading the favors. Then he leaves. I hear his tired tread on the stairs.

We carry in the trays, the cups, the glasses, the spoons, the forks, the plates, everything that can, should be in the living room for the Beginning. I hear the murmur of child and man above.

Madeline glances at her watch. "Ten minutes," she says. She looks pale.

"I guess we're ready," I say.

Steve and Tess come down. They are both very quiet.

"Tess, this is Madeline," Steve says, "the woman who is helping Mamo."

"Tess," she says. She raises her hand. To touch her cheek. To smooth her hair. Her hand hovers, makes a nervous blessing, then retreats.

Tess looks tired. Dusty, with a clean spot around each eye. Probably she has run all the way up Fyler Hill.

"There is one thing you could do for me," Madeline says.

I imagine her blue flowered shirtwaist blowing behind her as she disappears down the road on the back of Steve's bike, me in the doorway as the first ladies arrive, the telephone ringing in the background.

III. Desertion

Madeline reaches into her pocket and takes out her notes and once again sets them on the stack of containers.

"If the three of you could sit on the couch over there and pretend you're the audience and I could just go through the first few minutes of my demonstration. I think I could stop shaking before they get here."

Steve moves across the living room and sits down. He motions Tess to sit beside him. I sit next to Tess. Madeline clears her throat and pulls down on her dress.

"Just one small thing before you start," Steve says.

What now?

"You have a smudge of lipstick on your tooth."

"Oh no," Madeline says, scrubbing her fingers back and forth. She shows us her teeth.

"It's gone," Steve says. "Now we're all ready." The three of us settle into the soft maroon cushions. Land. For this moment, come to rest.

Madeline begins. "First, before I demonstrate for you what a fine product Tupperware is, I want you to know how much I appreciate being able to get together with all of you today."

Steve takes one of Tess's hands and I take the other. We smile at Madeline and she smiles back.

