

Rescue 1973

by Ginnah Howard

I remember it was raining and I didn't have an umbrella and I was standing there on the corner, waiting for Rudy's school bus, thinking, Why don't I have an umbrella? I'm twenty-three years old and I've never owned an umbrella. As far as I could remember my mother never owned one either and did that mean I was going to go through the rest of my life with rain coming down on my head? So there I was, waiting, and I knew the bus was pretty late, even though I didn't have a watch either. The same exact story as the umbrella. I was waiting there on the corner with December rain, Monterey rain, running down my back, and that got me thinking about backbones as in my father always saying I didn't have one and then thinking about that along the same lines as umbrellas and watches. You know, Was there some kind of connection? Rain and more rain and Steve hadn't been home for three days and I was down to my last cigarette and a half and my period was at least six weeks late. Merry Christmas; Happy New Year.

Rudy was the first one off the bus. He was wearing a hat made from a paper bag with the letters E-F-L pasted on the side. His smile disappeared when he didn't see Steve. Steve had been picking him up since he got laid off from his painting job.

"Where's Papo?" he said.

In jail. On the road. Gone to doggie heaven.

"I don't know, but I'll bet we'll hear from him today."

Hello, Carla, I'm in trouble.

"Told me that yesterday," he said, and pushed a wad of wrinkled school papers at me. His hands were covered with purple and red scribbles. I buttoned the papers in on top of my heart, a heart already bearing more than it could bear. How could it possibly take the weight of another child?

"I like your hat," I said. "Don't you want me to stick it inside my coat so it doesn't get soggy?"

"Have to wear it," he told me, going straight through the deepest puddle available. "I'm Santa's Helper."

The letters began to curl.

"Then we better hurry." I took his hand and we ran.

When we came up the alley in back of the apartment, Rudy went ahead to check the side for Steve's Harley. Still gone. Then he started up the stairs at a gallop. All four flights.

"What's your hurry?" I called. "The door's locked. Papo isn't up there."

Before he took off his coat, he looked in all the rooms, even the closets. Then he got up on a chair and pulled a couple of pieces of bread out. He replaced the twistem around the end of the bag and turned it about twenty times.

"Hello," I said to the back of his head.

He didn't answer. He was busy taking down jars.

I saw that his teacher had printed the word *Messy* across the top of his penmanship paper, a paper bruised by the weight of his effort, each crooked letter leaned into with such force that you could read it with your fingers on the other side. His teacher did not know about his talent with twistems, that no air would ever penetrate to any bread he was protecting.

Rudy spread practically half a jar of marshmallow gloop on top of the peanut butter before I closed the lid.

She did not know that Rudy's father was absent without prior notice. Mrs. Miss Ms. Ludlow, lend me your ear.

"How are the 2's coming?" I said.

He smacked the other piece of bread on top and smooshed it down just a bit. Then he licked the knife. Then he studied the problem: How to cut off the crusts without squishing out the insides. He pried the top off and set it back on the counter. Using both hands he sawed around the edges of that piece, then lifted the crust frame up to inspect various sections of the kitchen with one eye winked shut. Next he maneuvered the knife around the bottom crust, careful not to get into the goo. He placed the top back on and lifted the whole sandwich up out of the bottom crust and set it on his

Grateful Dead plate. He drooped the empty crusts over the sandwich, put the lid on the peanut butter, and the jars back on the shelf.

I pulled his chair out for him. "What about the 2's?" I said.

"What about Papo?" he said.

"He must be okay or we would have heard something."

"Heard what?"

Sirens. Shots. The whirring of wings.

"Are you supposed to do a sheet on the 2's for homework?"

He rotated his chin in a motion somewhere between a yes and a no. His father's chin, his father's avoidance of being pinned down. Rudy was a child of few words. And those few words were offered up with care, one at a time, each with its own separate place in the air between us. But mostly he spoke with his eyes, his chin, his shoulders. His silence. And there was not a day that his silence did not remind me of that dark night in Oregon, the stillness of his small white face in my lap. Each day wanting the courage to ask, "Do you finally forgive me?" But too scared his body's answer wouldn't be Yes.

The phone. My heart did its usual dive into my stomach and Rudy was off his chair and lifting the receiver before my breath kicked back in.

"Papo? Papo, where are you?" he hollered down the receiver as though into a dark hole that held his father.

Let Rudy drop the first line of rescue to Steve, give the first hard tug at his neglect of family and home, I thought, but then I saw Rudy's confusion and he pushed the receiver my way.

"Some lady collecting with Papo yelling in between," he said.

Even though half of me wanted to say No, I said, "Yes, we'll accept."

"Carla, it's me."

Steve and spoken in the careful tones of a man feeling his way across a minefield.

"Yes," was all I said. Not, where the hell have you been; not, Rudy and I have been worried sick. Not, I think I'm pregnant and oh, dear

god what am I going to do if I am? Let him inch along on his belly, his body tensed for the blast like I'd been the last three days, waiting for the ring of the phone that I knew, oh yes, knew, would be bringing more bad weather.

"Carla, you aren't going to believe this... Carla, are you there?"

"Yes," I said and then I saw Rudy, big eyed and worried. I pulled him onto my lap. "Talk to your son for a minute and let him know you're all right."

From where we sat in the hall I could count the layers of linoleum in the kitchen, the current piece just beginning to chip and curl along the edge. Apartments. Moving in and hoping tomorrow you'd have the energy to scrape away the bits of rotted something that stuck to the dairy section door in the refrigerator, that you'd have the heart to lift out the whole vegetable bin to deal with what was thickening under it. Apt # 6, Myrtle Ave. How on earth did I land here?

I shifted under the weight of Rudy's tense concentration. He listened and listened and nodded and frowned. "But how did they lift you and your motorcycle into the air?" was all he said. And then after a while, "Okay. But Mamo wants you home right this minute!" He handed me the phone and returned to his chair in the kitchen, but instead of eating his sandwich, he just sat there watching my face through the frame of his crust.

I locked the receiver against my ear and waited, waited for the big story I wasn't going to believe.

"Carla, are you listening?"

"I am," I said.

"I was standing at the counter of the Stop and Go, waiting to buy a pack of Luckies and head on home just like I told you I was going to..."

If he was once upon a timing as far back as standing at the counter, he couldn't have been calling from jail; they'd never have allowed the sprawl of time necessary for such a slow beginning. And it didn't sound like the way a man in traction would open. Even so my heart upped its volume at his tone of repentance. This was

some *new* unbelievable tale and it was going to cost more money that we didn't have than usual and more forgiveness that I didn't have either.

"...when this big dude by the gas pumps sees me through the window and lights up like I'm his long lost and motions me to meet him outside. And his energy is so strong I actually leave the line without the cigarettes and when I get to his van he hugs me and hands me a cup of something purple which I figure is wine and Carla, if I was one of those kooks, I'd say I'd been abducted by aliens, because the next thing I know the van blasts off and I see the earth spinning below us in the distance. That's the last I remember and then next thing I know I'm here."

"Here?"

The muffled sound of voices no doubt through Steve's hand over the phone and then an unmuffled blast of, no question about it, Grace Slick telling me I gotta find somebody to love. And if it hadn't been for Rudy's deep frown of concern, I probably would have slammed down the phone right there. Then Steve was back in my ear.

"I'm on the road between Sparks and Lovelock."

As pissed as I was, I had to laugh. Me, I was one stop beyond that. Rudy put down his crust and began to eat his sandwich.

"Nevada, Carla. I'm in Nevada. That's where I landed."

"Nevada?"

With that Rudy went over and started searching his map of *The United States of America*, the one he'd brought home from school and insisted on fastening to the front of our refrigerator, the one that had the question, *Where areYOU?* in large letters across the top, a question I found doubly irritating the first thing in the morning on both the days when I knew the answer and on the days when I didn't have a clue.

"Nevada," Steve repeated in a voice with all the energy drained off, a voice that was dragging itself along.

Just as my heart was about to slump into sympathy, I straightened up, got my backbone clamped into place. "And when

will we have the pleasure of your return to Monterey, California?" I said.

I saw Rudy was running his finger back and forth between Nevada and California, right to the little red dot we'd added to mark about where we were, "This is us and this is Papo; this is us and this is Papo," he kept whispering in a kind of lullaby beat with the swing of his finger.

"Well, that's just it, Carla, there are complications."

"Complications?" I said, going on with my straight-woman routine.

"My motorcycle's got engine problems. I'm out of money."

"He's being held captive against his will," a distant man's voice said, followed by laughter, female laughter. I was feeling less and less confusion about what my position would be in regards to requests for rescue.

"Carla, it's not like it sounds."

More and more sure of what had to be done about the lateness of my period.

"Carla, I want to come home."

There was a women's clinic next to the Safeway Market that did them. But I couldn't remember the name of it. I pulled the phone book over, trying to think what to look under.

"Carla, I'm going to need your help."

Medical. Clinic. Physician. I figured no way the ad was going to come right out with it.

"Carla, I'm sorry. Bad acid. A bad trip. It was a crazy thing to do."

I knew the J bus went right by there. The appointment would have to be while Rudy was in school. And how long would it take to get that kind of appointment?

"Carla, you know I love you and Rudy. And yes, I know I've got a wacky way of showing it."

No money for bus fare. We'd have to take back all the bottles, go through all the pockets, down behind all the cushions.

"Carla, I need for you to take Manny's truck. I know he won't mind. The keys are in a black box under the seat on the passenger

side. That's the only way I can think of to get my bike back there. Rizzo will advance you some money on my next painting job. I get my unemployment check next Monday."

I figured I'd need to take a taxi back. I wondered about the four flights of stairs, who I could get to meet Rudy's bus if necessary.

"You're going to have to figure the best way to get to Route 80 north. Then just stay on that heading toward Reno. I'm at the Lovelock Motel. Room 7."

There it was:

*Woman-to-Woman Clinic Reasonable Fees
Complete Confidential Gynecological Care
825-0000 for information and appointments.*

"And Carla, fill the radiator before you head out and bring two or three gallons of water in case...Carla?"

I hung up the phone.

Rudy came over and leaned against me. He patted my back.
"There, there, Mamo, there, there."

The pregnancy test was positive. I knew it would be. We figured seven weeks.

The woman behind the window must have been about my age.

"How are you doing?" she said.

"I'm okay."

"Do you feel like you'd like to talk to one of our counselors now? It's set up so there's plenty of time for that?"

"No," I said, "I just want to get it over with." I felt like five more seconds of her caring eyes and I'd dissolve. I couldn't help but notice that tacked along the ledge next to her desk were two little school pictures, above that, a framed photo of her, surrounded by a smiling family.

There were two other people waiting: a pale, puffy girl sitting beside a woman, probably her mother; there was that same something about the eyes, the hunch of the shoulders ^¾daughters and mothers^¾like watching one of those trick films that speeds up the time in between, that showed who the girl would be in twenty years after she got flattened and widened and pulled down. She couldn't have been more than sixteen, the age I was when I met Steve, when I got pregnant with Rudy. Sixteen. I didn't even let my mother know I was expecting until after Rudy was born. She was three thousand miles away and besides I knew she'd tell my father and I didn't want to give him all those extra months of satisfaction about how right-on his predictions had been.

I took a seat on the same side as the woman and the girl. That way I wouldn't have to look at them and they wouldn't have to look at me. The waiting room was small, with nothing extra and painted a sort of no color beige. Not blue, not pink, not yellow^¾like they knew you felt lousy and they understood enough not to try to cheer you up. I noticed there were no pictures on the walls^¾like they couldn't think of any subject that wouldn't rub it in.

The advance from Rizzo was enough to pay for the one hundred to the clinic, plus take us through a few weeks of peanut butter and hotdogs until I found a job. I'd just told Rizzo it was a family emergency and he hadn't pressed me. I got the feeling he knew if I was asking, we must be pretty down and he could spare it, so he did. He said Steve was a good worker and he felt confident he'd make it up to him.

Steve. When thoughts of Steve bored through, I plugged them up; NOT NOW, I told myself, that, and Keep Moving. From the minute I put down the phone on Steve's voice, I'd been on the move. I hoped my anger would keep a fire blazing under me long enough to get done what I needed to do. First I told Rudy Steve was working on a plan to get back home and set him to searching for loose change at the bottom of every jar and pocket and under every piece of furniture to find us enough money for milk and chocolate syrup and cigarettes. While he was busy, I called Rizzo and then the clinic.

During what they described as the in-take interview on the phone, the woman asked me why I'd decided to terminate my pregnancy. I was ready for that one: I said my husband had abandoned us and that I needed to get a job, that I'd been using something, but that I'd gotten pregnant anyway. (This foamy stuff I had to squirt up inside myself at just the wrong time.) That I already had a seven year old and I needed all my strength to take good care of him. All of which was true. I didn't feel it was necessary to get into the gory details: The Lovelock Motel, etc. They'd advised me it was likely I'd be out of there by 1:00, but that I should have alternate plans for Rudy, that the stairs would most likely be okay, but I should have alternate plans for that too. I arranged for my friend Marie to pick Rudy up if she didn't hear from me by 2:30. Her apartment was on the first floor and I knew we could stay with her for a few days if we had to. What's up? she'd asked. But I just told her I was looking for a job and there was a chance I'd get tied up a little longer than I expected. I wasn't going to tell her the real reason unless I absolutely had to. She would have cried and carried on. Marie was a good Catholic; plus she and her husband had been trying for a kid for a couple of years with no success.

I noticed that my hands were sweating and my heart was making itself noticeable. The woman had described in clinical detail exactly what would be involved in the procedure^{3/4}that's what she called it^{3/4}"the procedure." She said it would be best if I could bring a relative or friend along for support. No one I knew would have supported what I was doing. Only a few years ago I'd have been slipping down some back alley.

I remember that my mouth was incredibly dry and that got me thinking about the expression *hard to swallow*. That, and if I was nervous, how was that girl, who was just a kid herself, feeling? I saw the mother squeeze her daughter's knee and then go plowing through her pocketbook to come up with tissues for them both. I got to thinking about what it would have been like to have the kind of life where my mother would have been sitting next to me, passing out Kleenex. Then I started thinking about how if I had had that

kind of mother, maybe I wouldn't have had Rudy. And then I started to think about not having Rudy^{3/4}a kind of flash of pictures started passing through my mind, pictures with holes in them where Rudy had been cut out. And that was a big mistake or a great blast of grace because right then the fire went out.

I didn't know if it was me or the clutch, but every time I tried to ease off to accelerate, everything heaved and shuddered. Rudy kept looking at me, studying me like I was an interesting bug or something.

"Watch the parking lot," I told him. "I'll get it. We won't start out until I've got the feel of it. Remember I haven't driven standard since I was fourteen." Back when Babylove Stewart and I use to whip around up in the field in his father's old Pontiac.

"Papo's counting on us," Rudy said. I saw he had folded the road map down into a small square so that all that showed was the section where we'd traced our way from Monterey to Sparks in purple marker. We were going to ask beyond there.

"Let's just take a little time out while I have a cigarette and you eat some animal crackers." I pressed the brake slowly down; the truck lurched and stalled. I sat there staring out over the blurred expanse of black top, feeling at one with the abandoned shopping carts. The rain's steady drumming beat on the roof, but at least the lot was almost empty. That gave me the room to get up enough speed to practice shifting when I'd mastered the brakes, keeping in mind our lack of tread.

I noticed that instead of eating the crackers, Rudy was carefully laying the various animals out on the seat between us and hum-chanting a mix of Jingle Bells and Away in the Manger.

Another Christmas in Monterey. Sweet Jesus save me.

"What are you up to?" I said.

He didn't answer me. Then I saw that he was looking for pairs. He'd set out an elephant, then he'd carefully sort through the box looking for a match.

"That's a good way to work on the 2's so you don't get behind," I said. After several tries, my handwriting gave up on a note to Ms. Ludlow. "2 added to 2 gives you how many in all?"

He still didn't respond, just sort of shook his head, one of histoo-silly-for-words shakes. He continued lining the animals up in pairs.

"Kind of like Noah's Ark, huh?" I said, and with that he looked at me as though perhaps there was hope for me yet. Caught in his mood of concentration, I studied our immediate surroundings; certainly not the conveyance the Lord would have approved of for a rescue operation. I noticed that the knob on the radio was missing, that the side mirror had a crack right down the middle, that what had been a small wet spot on the ledge behind the seat was verging on becoming a stream.

Manny's truck figured in perfectly with the rest of the caper: the radiator had been down a couple of inches, the two back tires were heading toward bald, and one of the taillights had been out. Marie's husband had run me through a quick review of the H pattern, cautioned against riding the clutch, put in a couple of quarts of oil, added coolant and water, pumped up the tires, changed the back bulb, listened with fascination to the engine and left us with a shake of the head which I knew meant he'd pray for us, but that the possibility of a successful round trip was a real test of his faith.

Once I realized I was going to let my body carry on with what it was up to; once I realized I was going to accept the baby that appeared to be floating our way, I put Rudy on the phone to Room 7 of The Lovelock Motel with the following instructions: Tell Papo that I said we are going to attempt to rescue him this one last time, and that he better be ready and ever after grateful which Rudy smooshed down to "Papo, we're coming, but you better be good for goodness sake."

Steve knew nothing about my being pregnant. Even before Lovelock, I was thinking it over, wondering if I had the strength. I knew he'd be happy: Steve loved babies. And why not? He'd feed them, change them, take them to the park, even get up in the night. When he felt like it. But here you go, Carla, when he didn't. The

thing is children are so, well, you know, so all the time and forever. And I'm not talking about laundry.

The animals were spread out in little paired groups all over the seat and Rudy had turned the box upside down and was patting the bottom so that crumbs were falling like confetti over all the couples.

"You need to eat those before they get any more yucky and then clean up the mess," I told him. "We've got to take a few more practice runs and then we've got to hit the road. We do not want to be trying to find our way in the dark on top of everything else."

"There's only one bear," he said, his eyes all squinted up with concern as he looked down into the box.

"Come on, come on," I said. The reality of me setting out to drive to Nevada with Rudy in a broken-down truck that burned oil and leaked water and god knows what else finally hit my nervous system. I turned the ignition and fluttered the accelerator. The bugger actually groaned to a start.

"Put those animals away and prop the pillow up against the dashboard and remember how I told you to squinch down if I tell you to.

"He's going to be lonely," Rudy said, like he hadn't heard a word.

"All right. All right." I took a full breath and let it go. I knew once I told Rudy, there'd be no more possibility of that final exit. "I'm going to tell you a secret, but you've got to promise you're going to give me your full cooperation for the rest of this adventure."

"What secret?"

"That you're going to be my Rudy on-the-spot co-pilot."

He looked up at me and smiled and began to pick up the crackers. "I promise," he said.

I counted on my fingers. "Sometime in the middle of the summer, about seven and half months from now, you are going to get a baby brother or sister."

He didn't say anything and he didn't look at me. He just kept putting the animals back in the box two by two. I waited and listened to the idle of the engine. After he carefully closed the box,

he plumped the couch cushion into place. Then finally he turned and looked at me hard.

"You better not be fooling around," he said.

"Cross my heart," I reassured him. "We are going to have a baby."

I waited and after a few minutes, he turned and looked at me hard again. "Good, but now I want you to tell me how we get a baby."

I reached up and wiped the window with the edge of my sleeve. And one defective defroster. "How do you think we get a baby?"

He looked at me suspiciously. Then he leaned back and looked out the window. His forehead puckered up like he was squeezing his thoughts one by one. Finally he said, "You tell what you think first."

"All right," I said, "but I want to wait until we're on our way in fourth gear, a little more sure of the road. Then I promise we'll figure it out."

"Okay," he said.

I turned on the lights and pushed down on the clutch while I shifted slowly into first. We lurched toward the highway. "This is it," I said. Once again I was going to have to go out there before I got the feel of it. I speeded up and swung the truck a bit wide to avoid a shopping cart. The wipers squeak-squeaked, leaving ragged smears right in my best line of vision. I ducked my head slightly to get a better view of the approaching traffic. I glanced at Rudy out of the edge of my eye. He was sitting up straight with his hands folded in his lap. I flicked the right signal and pressed down while shifting into second. There was a terrible grinding of the gears as we kind of leapt onto the highway. Several cars honked. My heart banged and my hands shook and everything on the truck that could vibrate, did. Standard transmission, Life^{3/4}there were just too many procedures to do simultaneously.

"Sparks, here we come," I shouted and got her up enough to shift into a lurching, scraping third.

