

Rope & Bone '86

by Ginnah Howard

His shirts he hangs on the back of the chair, one on top the other so they won't wrinkle. On the end of the kitchen table he begins to fold the rest of his clothes, piling them up by kind: underwear, jeans, bandannas. Like the women in the Laundromat do. As the stacks spread, Carla's friend, Del, moves her papers over to make room. While he folds, he listens to his daughter's laughter above the TV. For a moment he feels like he lives here again. All the dents and cracks are familiar. The half-stripped table he started last winter waits. While he stands in this kitchen, sorting socks and rolling them into lumpy wads, he watches Carla. He watches Del.

"You do good work," Carla says. "Did Marion teach you that? You never did laundry when you were with me."

He looks up at her to see if she's being nasty, but she just smiles and goes on rinsing the glasses.

He watches Del cross off and write, chew on her pencil, and write some more. She says she's fixing a poem. Fixing a leaky hose, fixing the toilet. Fixing a poem? She shifts in her chair, pulls on her hair, says, "Carla, see if this makes sense so far."

He puts the sock down, inches toward the words, words strung out down the page.

*"They marry:
Rope and Bone.
Sunday and Saturday.
That and this.*

*He said, 'It was our finest hour.'
She wept. "*

Carla butts in, "The 'She wept.' Sounds too much like Jesus." Then Del X's out a line and looks up at the ceiling like she's waiting for words to drop from above.

He tosses the last roll of socks on the pile. His shirts need buttons. Carla used to do them. Marion doesn't. "You got any thread," he says. Carla turns and drops her jaw. He ignores this. "I need white thread and a needle."

She goes up to her room to find them. He follows her as far as the foot of the stairs and calls, "And dark thread. Dark blue thread." He pulls Tess's hair lightly as he passes her chair.

"What you doing, Papo?" Tess says, not looking away from the screen.

"Sewing buttons."

"Well, when this is over, I'll help. Okay?"

"All right."

Carla returns with the whole sewing box and a crack about how she's fresh out of thimbles. He ignores her again. He checks each of his shirts, sets aside the ones missing buttons. Several have rips in the elbows, torn pockets. Maybe next week. He smiles at the picture of himself: Steve Morletti, Pagan Biker, busy with his mending. He settles himself into a chair and pushes aside all the piles, careful not to disturb Del's papers. When she looks up, he motions her to go on. Everything's under control.

No buttons. He searches through the box. None. He does not want to get into this business with Carla again. He explores the box, layer by layer, once more. Not one button. Besides they have to be small and like the rest. He sits and stares at the shirts spread before him.

Then he laughs and looks down his front. He counts the buttons from his neck to his waist and the empty spaces on the shirts before him. Then with a tiny pairs of scissors, he snips off the buttons he needs from the parts he tucks in his pants. He lines them up in a row, ready.

He looks over at Carla. She sits by the window, smoking a cigarette, staring out at the bright blue sky. The sun touches her white blouse, her black hair. He had forgotten her hair: hair that always gets away from clips and scarves.

In the little pin cushion he finds a bunch of needles. He chooses one with a small golden eye. He lifts the needle to the light, pushes his cap back, and, squinting, pokes the white thread through the tiny hole the first try. He pulls the thread down to make it double and ties the ends together in a knot at the bottom.

Putting on a button shouldn't be too hard. He straightens the shirt in front of him, lines the little white plastic circle up across from the button hole, then slips the needle under, lightly holding the tiny rim with the nail of his forefinger. In jabbing for the opening, the button shifts a little. Once it's fastened down, it'll be easier. As he recalculates the exact spot, he notices there are three tiny punctures. Tracks left by the missing button. This changes things.

He lifts the shirt onto his legs and pushes back from the table. From underneath he pokes the needle through one of the little dark holes and then slips the button over the point. Carefully, so as not to tangle the long thread, he pulls it all the way out. He puts the needle in another hole of the button, finds the second dark speck with the point, pushes it part way in, and from below draws the thread down with one final tightening tug. The button is trapped.

Then he notices Carla looking at him. He keeps sewing, keeps his brow wrinkled. The kitchen is quiet. TV voices murmur in the distance. He sees Carla turn back to the blue sky, the kind of blue that only comes in February.

February. One year ago this month he ran out of this kitchen, on Carla's voice, on Carla standing with a maybe loaded gun screaming, You ever touch me again and I'll kill you. Left his children, Rudy and Tess, on the dark stairs, listening. Slammed the door so hard, the old window cracked. A late icy February night. No bright blue sky, no pretty Carla then. Somehow he got to Marion's. The drive from Danford to Utica is still a blank in his mind, but the next morning there he was passed out on the front seat in the alley behind Marion's apartment.

The thing with Carla was that every new fight, she brought it all up again. Sometimes before he even got in the door, she screamed, You son of a bitch. Then she always got to how many years they'd

been married. She'd look up like she was talking to God and say, Five years. Ten years. Nineteen years^{3/4}real disgusted. But the night she got out the gun, she didn't bother reminding him of the years. Somewhere she'd found out about Marion. When he came home late, she was waiting on the stairs. She jumped on him and started clawing him in the face like a crazy person. Then he ended up slapping her. She went nuts, started biting and throwing stuff. All the while yelling, I'm not like my mother. I don't have to put up with your shit. Then it seemed like out of nowhere she had his gun, aiming it right at him. That was when he got the hell out.

After a few days at Marion's, he went home. Piled on the porch, all his stuff: boxes and bags, all his pictures. Everything. And a note. Something about how she was done with living with someone who couldn't hear, how there was a person inside her body. A note that said if he tried to get in, she'd call the cops. That the next time he heard from her, it'd be through her lawyer. That this time she meant it. When he started banging on the door, he saw her go to the phone. He left. Let her cool off, start to miss him. Three days later, painting up on a scaffold, he got a registered letter from some woman lawyer in Marwick. Lot of big words he never did read. Boiled down to a legal separation, a visit with the kids Sundays, and fifty a week.

But that was a year ago. Most of the war's over. Today he feels good. Home for his Sunday visit. He's given her the promised fifty, plus fifty from before. He's painting full time, even though it's winter.

He watches Carla. She lights another cigarette. She looks at him and smiles. He goes on sewing. The second button's easier. Yes, today Carla's being friendly. She may change any minute, but today she's got the white flag up. She crosses the kitchen, reads over Del's shoulder.

"I'm almost ready," Del says. "Then I'll read it to you, see if it's clear."

Carla starts pulling stuff out for dinner. "Well, I like the last part, 'mutually generous.'" She raises her arms and laughs.

He's always liked Carla's laugh, every part of her moves. He remembers the good times when she laughs. He watches the rise of her breasts, the curve of her belly. Out of the corner of his eye follows her ass as she bends to get potatoes out of the bin. Yes, today he feels fine.

"When you finish that, I got some socks you can darn," Carla says.

"Okay," he answers, biting the thread, "but I have a price."

"You're right about that. Morning, noon, and night. I'm aware of your rates."

He looks in her dark eyes, wants her to remember some of those times. "How about getting me a beer?" he says.

"Get it yourself. And don't start drinking so early. Next you'll be getting loud and obnoxious. Start telling me what to do," Carla says all of this while she's reaching in the refrigerator, opening him a beer.

He sits and drinks and sews. Only three more buttons to do. Carla peels potatoes at the sink. Del sits across from him, her small hands at rest on the table now. She reads softly to herself, her lips moving, her head bouncing a little. Then she begins to copy it all over, her tongue reaching out to lick her upper lip every few lines.

Del, now here's a woman hard to figure. Different. Her slanted eyes and bony cheeks. Del, always a little distant. Maybe a couple years older than him. Forty-five, forty-six. Stayed in that cabin all alone. Her man only there some weekends. He never had any teachers like her. He talked to her husband right before it happened. Him walking along the road. The eyes of a man not right in his head. Burning up. Always with his kids, seemed to love those kids. Shot himself. Should've stopped by his place and smoked some good weed with him, told him...yeah, life's a bitch, but it can be fine. Once he asked Del, How come a lovely lady like you isn't married? I didn't like being married, she said.

"Ready," Del says. She clears her throat, raises the new paper from the table. Carla stops cooking. He puts down the shirt and leans forward. Del's eyes touch his and blink, like she only just realized he's there. She smiles and starts to read.

He likes the sound of it. They marry...Rope and bone...Speaking in tongues untranslatable. Del reads on. It seems like Del's as pissed with the woman as she is with the man.

Del stops. Right away Carla starts with the questions.

He leans his chair back and, balancing against the shelves, pulls another beer from the fridge. He tosses the cap into the basket by the sink and drinks. He sews and listens to the women, but they don't tell what he wants to know: Who's the rope? Who's the bone?

He watches Del. What would Del be like in bed, her cat-stretching body, her teardrop tits, rising and falling? But she never sends him any signals. A flick of her shoulders says, 'I don't do one night stands.' Hey, he's serious, too, but, well, another kind of serious.

Still pushing the needle back and forth through the little holes of the button, he asks, "Is that how women feel? That they're so different from men?" He sees Carla's surprise: the jerk of her head, the widening of her eyes. She stares at him.

"I don't know about Women," Del answers, "but I've felt all those things."

"Amen," says Carla, and turns back to the frying chicken.

"Well, I don't know, darlin's. I don't know about us being so different. Look at it out there: the sun shining, that bright blue sky. Why I could just take the two of you into that big old bed. We could have a fine afternoon."

Del laughs.

Carla laughs too. "You must be smokin' some good stuff, baby. Dream on," she says.

Steve hangs another finished shirt on the back of the chair. "I'd like a copy of that poem," he says. Del hesitates, looks over her first sheet, then with a smile, pushes the new copy across the table to him. "Thanks," he says and folds it into many squares to tuck in his wallet.

"He wants it for That Woman," Carla says, banging the lid down on the potatoes. "As if she could relate to 'standing at the sink washing diapers.' She doesn't know anything about that: having

kids or having no money." She jerks open the refrigerator door and pulls out the milk.

"Carla, don't start," he says and caresses her bottom, feels her familiar warmth in his palm. She moves away. Leaves his hand in midair. She gives him no chance to fan any fires. That night with the gun, it was like Carla went round a corner and she never came back. She must have told him she meant it a dozen times through the years. This time she did.

He tries to push a dark thread through the eye. His aim is careful, but each time only part of the thread enters the hole. He wets the end to a point in his mouth like his mother used to do. He is surprised by this memory. He sees her sitting in an old rocker, sewing. Curving over her shoulder is a tall brass lamp with gold fringe hanging from a big white shade.

"You know what I just thought of Carla? Back when I was maybe seven or eight, living on Ramsey Street, and every night after dinner my mother sat down under an old brass lamp and mended our clothes." He shuts his eyes. "I see all the rooms. Up in the attic where me and Jimmy slept. In the mornings I listened to the pigeons."

"Oh," Del whispers, and her hands move in the air, "that's one of the things I remember most. The pigeons up under my grandmother's eaves, right outside my bedroom window. Did you ever try to make that sound? I used to listen and listen and try."

He tilts his head and leans forward like he hears something, something off in the distance. He laughs. Then slowly he draws his head down into his shoulders. His chest swells. He begins to wobble his neck and out of his throat there comes a gargled coo.

Del giggles, "That's it." She tries, fails totally, tries again.

Carla comes to the edge of the table. She bends toward him over the piles of clothes and really looks at him. "Steve?" she says. Then she laughs and sits down in the chair beside him. She begins to pull her neck into her shoulders.

Tess appears, wearing her father's black leather jacket. "What's that funny sound?"

"What's it sound like?" Steve says.

"Sounds like a pigeon."

"Well, that's what it is. A pigeon."

"A pigeon here in the kitchen?" Tess says and begins to search.

When Tess turns away, Steve coos again. Carla and Del laugh.

"What's so funny?" Tess says.

"It's your dad, Tess. Show her, Steve," Carla urges, wrapping her arm around the child's waist. Again he lowers his head, swells, waggles his neck, and coos.

Tess snaps her fingers. "Cool, show me how."

"Show us all," says Del.

Tess sits down on her father's lap. Tess has Carla's beautiful face: the same big, soft mouth and dark eyes. But her movements are all Steve. Ready and quick. Steve moans. "You sure are getting big."

Tess grins. "Do the pigeon."

Steve sets aside the shirt. "First of all, you don't just do it. To start you have to, you have to become a pigeon."

Carla's eyes widen again. They are all watching. The phone rings. The pigeon disappears.

"Answer it, Tess," Carla says. Tess doesn't move. It rings again.

"Tess," she repeats, her voice rising.

Steve pushes her lightly from his lap and Tess creeps to the hall.

Carla yells, "One of these days, Tess, one of these days." Almost to herself she says, "They're threatening to turn off the phone. They'd be doing me a favor."

Tess calls from the hall, "Mamo, it's Rudy. He wants a ride from town. He's at his girlfriend's."

"Cradle robber," Carla yells in the direction of the hall. Then her look is all charm. "Steve, the Pinto isn't running. Could you?" She gives him her Beautiful Smile.

"Tell him I'll come get him if my car starts," Steve hollers to Tess.

Carla leans toward him. "You having trouble with your car?" She shakes her finger. "I told you not to buy that car. I mean it already had 130,000 on it. It was a torpedo when you got it."

How quickly she turns. He shrugs. He is not, goddammit, he is not going to get into it with her today. He wishes he had a dollar for every fight they've had over old cars.

"I can go if you have any trouble," says Del.

"I think it'll run. Come on, Ramboette," Steve says to Tess. "Let's go get your brother." He takes the last two beers from the refrigerator and eyes the bottle on top. He'd like a shot for the cold, but Carla stares at him hard. Instead he takes his jacket off Tess as Tess starts for the hall. "Get your own coat," he says to the whines of protest. He sets the beers on the edge of the cabinet and begins to rummage through a drawer.

"What are you doing?" Carla says.

He opens a beer, takes a long drink, takes another, lets her wait. "Where's a screwdriver. What'd you do rearrange the whole house?" He means to keep it light, but just the thought of the carburetor puts him on edge.

And, of course, Carla doesn't let it go by. She never does. "You got a problem with me rearranging the whole house?" she asks, her hands go to her hips, her chin angles toward him. He knows her fingers will curl into fists next. They do.

"A screwdriver, Carla, all I want is a screwdriver."

"In the hall closet," she says, her back to him now, her hands stirring something on the stove. "Steve," he can hear she's sorry, "talk to Rudy about that woman. No good's going to come of a nineteen year old messing with someone who's thirty and got two kids." She faces him again.

"Carla, you know he won't hear it."

"Talk to him anyway. Please."

He nods, downs the rest of the beer, and puts the last can in his pocket. He moves into the hall, passes his and Carla's old room, empty now, closed up for the winter. The closet surprises him: an old saw, a hammer, a screwdriver, a rusty pair of scissors hang on the wall. Beneath, Carla has nailed a sign, *Return Or Else*. Here's another Carla he didn't know. He sticks the screwdriver in his pocket and squats to help Tess pull her boots over thick socks. His

throat tightens where Tess's small silky head rests beneath his chin. He looks for a pair of gloves, doesn't find any.

They go out the front. Carla has fastened a long strip of duct tape across the cracked glass. Maybe he'll fix it one day. It's probably been Exhibit A for her story about how he slammed out one February night, leaving her with half a cord of wood on the porch. He's heard it himself four or five times.

"Shut the door," he reminds Tess who leaves it wide. "And Tess, do what your mother says. When she asks you to get the phone, do it right then." Tess doesn't respond. "Tess, do you hear me?"

"Yes," she says, cocking one shoulder just like he does.

The daylight is gone, taken over so quickly by February darkness. It's a lot colder out. They get in the front seat. He opens the last beer, drinks, places the can between his legs. Again wishes he had a couple shots to dissolve the knot in his throat, something to lift the heaviness he now feels.

He pushes down on the pedal, turns the key. It starts up and immediately dies. He bangs the dash lightly with his fist. A rebuilt carburetor costs \$150. He doesn't have that kind of money this week. He's not going to ask Marion. He finishes the beer, his fingers numbed by the freezing metal. Tess drums softly on her knees, hums.

"All right when I holler, I want you to turn the key like this." He mimes the motion. "Then right away push down on the gas like this. When it starts, kind of flutter it like this. Listen and I'll tell you when to start and when to stop. We've got to do it just right." On Tess's face is a look of complete concentration. "You have mittens in your pocket?"

Tess shakes her head no.

He pulls the seat forward and gets out. Tess slides over, the top of her head barely visible above the wheel. He rolls down the window a few inches so the kid can hear him and closes the door. He zips his jacket as far up as it goes and moves to the front of the battered Chevy.

Through the kitchen window, he watches Carla and Del moving around the table, putting on cups and plates, the knives on one side, the forks on the other. He watches the flow of their arms, the swing of their hips.

Their lips move. He leans toward them.

