

Winter '69

by Ginnah Howard

One minute Rudy was sitting up close to me, asking me how could Geppetto make a little boy out of a piece of wood, and the next, Steve was pounding up the stairs, yelling, "Carla, get blankets, warm clothes; we're leaving, we won't be back." Then Rudy was crying, "What's wrong, Papo? Why are you mad?"

He never got an answer. Steve had already disappeared, his voice booming from the foot of the stairs, "Jane and Richie are coming, too." Then the door banged shut.

It never crossed my mind to say, Stop, wait, no. I just started grabbing stuff and throwing it into paper bags, cursing Steve and my ignorance for not seeing that when I ran away from home at fifteen and hung out on the streets with bikers, I was headed for this turn not too far down the freeway.

That night while I rampaged around the apartment, Rudy was right behind me every minute, saying, "What are you doing, Mamo?" "Mamo, why are you mad?"

"Be quiet," I told him.

Finally when we were jammed into Richie's Chevy, sitting to the ceiling on top the blankets and bags and pillows, we found out what happened: Steve and Richie had gotten into a fight with a couple of guys in a bar, broken a lot of glass, Richie'd shown a gun and because they were both on probation, it wasn't going to be long before the police would be at our door.

"Where are we going?" I said.

"Up near Klamath Falls."

"Klamath Falls?"

"Oregon. To cut pulp wood. To stay out of sight for a while."

We arrived in the night, slept in the car in front of the mill office. A full moon. Everything white and frozen. Richie ran the engine off and on, but it was an old Chevy, an old heater. Rudy twisted into a

little ball between us and sucked his thumb, something he hadn't done since he was a baby.

Steve and Richie got jobs in the morning. Their boss rented us a furnished trailer for almost nothing about fifteen miles up in the mountains. And it turned out it *was* for almost nothing. A rusted turquoise trailer, with half the windows boarded, squatting in a narrow ravine between two icy mountains a quarter mile from the road. Snow-heavy spruces everywhere. Right away I understood those trees. We stood there in the snow looking at that trailer. Rudy clung to my knees. He had not said two words since we left the apartment. He just kept looking in my face, and he never let go of some part of me.

We smoked a joint and went inside: two dark holes for rooms in the back with a couple stained mattresses. In a 10 X 10 space in front, an old cook stove and a rusty potbelly, a dangerous looking pipe leaning out a hole on the side. Mouse turds and trash. No toilet, no water, no lights. And freezing cold. I wanted to cry. I gave Steve the isn't-there-any-other-way look.

"No," he said, "we got this on credit."

I knew from our inventory in the car he was right. Between the four of us we had three packs of cigarettes, some grass, a few bottles of beer, 1 jar of instant coffee, a dozen hot dogs, toilet paper, tampons, and eighteen dollars and forty-three cents. Plus I had a couple dozen goof balls, undeclared.

Jane and I started clearing out the junk while Steve and Rich brought in wood. Steve got the pipe a little safer, built a fire. They found a frozen brook not far from the trailer and an outhouse in back. It was a kerosene cook stove and the tank was half full. Things were looking up. Richie made a sled out of an old square of plywood by fastening a rope through a hole. Jane and Rudy and I broke a place in the ice and filled up a bunch of plastic milk jugs we found in the trash. We hauled those back, with Rudy smiling, finally, and whipping a piece of leftover rope in the snow. His eyes said, Mush, you huskies, but no sounds came from his mouth. "See this isn't so bad," Jane said to him. He didn't answer.

We heated water in a big old pot and began to clean away some of the filth. Steve cooked hot dogs that we ate with our fingers, licking the warm grease as it ran down our wrists. We stayed stoned and rode on this Family Robinson rush through January. Richie and Steve started bringing in money. Richie met a truck driver who got us pot or anything else we wanted. We found a junk store and bought kerosene lamps, a card table and chairs, a small black and white TV we could run off a battery. Steve put an old antenna up and we crowded around watching shadows swimming through snow. We pulled the battery back and forth to the car for recharging.

Rudy had never been a chatterbox, but at the trailer he wouldn't answer any of us. Even when he played with his little truck, though he moved his lips, no rudnnn rudnnn came out. I knew there was nothing wrong with his hearing because sometimes I'd whisper, Rudolph, and he'd always turn around right away and smile at me funny. I tried to get him to talk: How many fingers? How old are you? Nothing.

It started to get on Steve's nerves. "Leave the kid alone. He'll talk when he feels like it."

When there wasn't anyone around, I tried to coax him. What was the name of that dog that lived next door to us back at the apartment before we came here? I didn't say home because we'd lived so many places since Rudy was born I'm not sure he knew quite what that meant. Not that I knew much more about it because my father was in the army and I remember moving nine times before I got to fourth grade. Anyway it didn't matter how I said it because when I started with the questions, Rudy walked away.

I got scared maybe he was retarded, but then I thought, No, that couldn't be. Before we left Monterey, he could sing along with all the popular songs, could fill in the words when we read stories over again.

February. We got by, figured we could make it till spring, figured we could go back to California by then. But. Jane got pregnant and puke-sick every morning. Steve and Richie had a blow up: I'm tired

of you doing this. And I'm fed up with you doing that. Rich and Jane packed and left in the night. I'm sorry, she said as she hugged me goodbye. Jesus, me too. I thought of the days there with only Rudy. I'd be talking to the walls.

The first week they were gone, Steve stayed in town. "Just till I get paid so I can get a car."

"Take us with you. I'm not staying out here by myself," I screamed after him as he walked out to the road to hitch to the mill the next morning. An angry dog face looked back at me and snarled. It was not the face from five years ago, straight-ahead eyes, alive and surprising; not the mouth that talked about the crescent moon back when we met. Said, "Carla, you are one pretty woman." Bet that snarling face was the one Steve's first wife left, packed up one day and said, I never want to see you again. And a few other things.

When he kept walking, I thought, Fuck you. I'm taking the kid and leaving this hole. "You'll be sorry," I called to the black leather speck in the distance. My mind filled with getting even, to the sight of him coming home that next Friday night to a dark, cold trailer. No me. No son. I turned to go back and saw Rudy standing in the doorway, his little face pinched, silent tears, three going on forty. Then I cried, too, wondered how I got to this place, living in a beat up trailer. Just what my father always used to forecast, that I was going nowhere.

I picked up Rudy, felt his chicken-feather head under my chin. I closed the door tight against the wind. "It's okay, Doodle," I said to him. We sat by the stove. "Papo will come back with a car Friday. Maybe he'll bring you something. How would you like that?" But he didn't answer.

Anyway where would I have gone, hitching with a child in the middle of winter? Not to my mother to hear my father make 'I told you so' sounds. To hear him say, What's the matter with the dummy? I looked around the little kitchen. There was enough food, enough wood. We'd survive.

February and March I slept. I did enough phenobarb to keep me under. Something bad was happening to us, but I was too doped to do anything. Steve blamed me; I blamed him. We barely spoke, fucked in the angry darkness, then rolled away and did not touch. Steve got an old car, one that wouldn't start. Every morning we heard him screaming at it. He sounded like my father. Rudy and I stayed out of his way. When we knew he was finally gone, we hauled in wood, dragged water back from the brook. With a black crayon, I X'd off the days on the calendar hanging by the sink. I washed dishes and watched the inch by inch track to spring when I was going to do something for sure. During the day I slept, curled on a mattress in front of the stove. I never read to Rudy anymore. Instead he sat in the crook of my body. He colored and watched junk on TV. The cartoon voices laughed from a distance. When the battery died, he just sat in silence. He never made any sounds, not even when he cried. Curled on that mattress, my body felt thick, wrapped in a soft cocoon. Always there was the smell of kerosene.

Rudy moved my head back and forth, pulled on my hands. He stuck his fingers in my mouth and wiggled my tongue. "Let me sleep. Just a few more hours, please," I said to him. The more I got, the more I needed. Before Steve got home, I tried to be up cooking something at the stove. He came in and glared at me. I stopped getting dressed, stopped combing my hair.

"You should see yourself," he said. "Why don't you get cleaned up and lay off the pills. I can't stand to look at you."

"So don't," I answered. I felt ugly. I didn't care.

Then it happened.

I opened my eyes to darkness. Steve was shaking me hard. "Jesus, Carla, wake up. Something's wrong with Rudy. I think he's poisoned. Maybe your pills."

I heard Steve calling to me down a tunnel, felt him slapping me, heard Rudy's name. I sat up and saw Rudy wrapped in a blanket at the foot of the mattress. His face dead white, his body still. Steve pulled on my pants, put my arms in my coat. "I tried to get him to throw up. Nothing. He's unconscious."

Steve carried Rudy down the long snowy path to the car, kind of pushing me ahead, saying firmly every time I staggered, every time I fell, "Get up, Carla. Keep going. We have to get him to the hospital."

Finally we came to the road. I held Rudy in my arms. The car started. Steve drove the fifteen miles in silence. I sat looking into the strange still face of my child, saying over and over, Please, God, let him be all right. I promise, I promise...

When we got to the emergency room, they rushed him away. Steve told them off to the side what he thought Rudy took. I looked at the floor.

"What happened?" a nurse asked

"I don't know," I said. "I was asleep." They knew I had neglected my child, but they didn't accuse me.

Steve and I sat alone in the waiting room. He didn't accuse me either. He knew I felt bad enough. Once he touched my arm and said, "We'll hear soon."

Finally the doctor came out. "I think he's going to be okay. He's sleeping. We'll know more in the morning."

We stayed with him in his hospital room all night. In the morning he woke up, but he was pale and still. I read him *Pinocchio*, trying to go back to before everything bad happened, back to sitting close on the couch in Monterey. "See that's Geppetto, Rudy. And that's Jiminy. Remember. He's there to tell Pinocchio good from bad." But he wouldn't even look at me. Steve rolled the bed up a little, put another pillow under his head. I sat by his bed and colored. "You do the clown and I'll do the balloons," I said. All the while he was silent. I wanted to tell him how sorry I was, but I couldn't face his eyes when I said it. Steve lifted him into the wheelchair and pushed him back and forth around the beds. He never smiled.

Out the window I saw a purple flower coming up through the snow. I remembered it was April. "Oh, look, Rudy," I said.

Steve pointed Rudy's face toward the purple spot. "Won't you tell her what you see?"

When he didn't respond, I turned away. The only sound was the soft squeak of rubber, the slight back and forth motion of Rudy's chair. Then just when I thought I could not bear another moment, I heard a whisper, a voice I did not know.

"Why did he want a little boy?"

