

Ginnah Howard

AND WE SELL APPLES '77

I hear the car door slam. Steve, about to duck daddy-duty: Just gonna take a run to the Quickway.

“Rudy,” I say, “go get in the car. Tell Papo I said *Wait*.”

Rudy turns the TV up. I turn it off. The sound of the muffler. I open the door and scream, “Steve!” as in STOP. I hand Rudy his sweatshirt. “Go. This minute.” I tug Tess’s sweater over her head. She starts to cry. Rudy puts his hands on his ears and scoots under the table where he knows I can’t reach him. Three years old, big as she is, I sling Tess up on my hip and turn off the light. “Fine,” I say. “You stay here all by your lonesome while I go to Aunt Peggy’s.”

The trees, just starting to glow on the hills. Sometimes I love this place; sometimes I don’t. I close the door and start for the car. Steve’s eyes dead ahead. Dead in his tracks. His best cap, ponytail combed. Premeditated duty-ducking while I’m in the basement trying to figure out why the washer isn’t washing. “It’s okay, Baby,” I tell Tess, tucking her head under my chin. “You can play Fire Station at Peggy’s.”

I slide in. Put Tess between us. “Going somewhere?” I say.

He says, “Rena,” as in Spare Me. “What about Rudy?”

“He’s just waiting for me to stop screaming before he comes on board.”

“Have you stopped screaming?”

“Drop us at Peggy’s. Pick us up on your way back from the Quickway with the milk.”

Steve grins.

“Why didn’t you take your bike?”

“I wouldn’t have been able to fit everybody on.”

I knew this meant it wouldn’t start.

Rudy climbs in back, clutching a big plastic bag.

“What you got?” Steve says, tilting the rear view so he can check him out.

“Something.”

We both know it’s his blanket. In case. A something he cannot sleep without.

“Ice cream,” Tess sings.

“You got any money?” Steve asks us all.

“No,” Tess says.

Steve tilts the mirror again to look at Rudy. Rudy, his double. Gonna make me. Rudy stares out the window. We both know he’s brought his entire stash: every nickel, dime, and penny he’s managed to squirrel away. Rudy, already counting the life boats. You can see why.

Tess yells, “Papo has money.”

We know this is true or he wouldn’t be heading out. I even know about how much: maybe twenty and change. Enough for a toot at The Eagle. Plus a few joints on his person. Payday tomorrow and plenty of house painting ahead before the winter lay-off, so Hey, doesn’t a man have a right?

I look back at our home-sweet-home. Not as ramshackle as it was when we moved in two years ago. Steve has just put on a new roof; my morning glories have made their way up the strings for the first time. Steve's Harley, our lawn ornament. All of it backed by those hills and not a house in sight.

"See how good the gray roof looks," I say. Steve had wanted bright green shingles that made me want to cry.

He pulls onto the gravel. The Pinto sounds even more ragged than usual. Chugging along on Chicken Farm Road. Cross my heart: Chicken Farm Road. Could I come up with that on my own?

I lean toward Steve over Tess's head. "You better do something about that muffler or you're going to get stopped."

"Rena," he says, as in Don't bring me down.

"Plus," I say, meaning the car's lack of legality on all fronts.

I open the glove compartment to look for a brush. The smell of pot. Something flips onto the seat. Tess picks it up and begins to zigzag it down my thigh in time with her siren sound: Tess, the Fire Chief. "Let's return that to the station," I say, taking the hash pipe from her. I wave it by Steve's nose. He breathes in. I shove the pipe way to the back and slam the compartment door. "Plus, plus."

"Tess, see why I don't always take Mamo out to play."

"Yes," Tess says.

Steve makes the turn at Grat's Bend. We pass the log cabin, one of our few neighbors. Place has no electric, no inside plumbing. Outhouse in back. A pump for water by the steps. Woman who lives there makes baskets – Sally Somebody. Hippie-

type. Probably she calls us Hell's Angels. Very No Trespassing. What can you expect? Steve's explanation. Got her marijuana growing practically in her front yard. Only sun available where the power lines run up through the hills. We check her rows of corn to see if we can spot her plants.

"Tucked away sweet as you please," Steve says. "August, harvest in sight."

"Your harvest has been right along," I tell him. Steve keeps going out and trimming off a few leaves every few days, drying them in the oven.

Up ahead, a tall man is walking along the side of the road, ragged shorts, even from the back, looking forlorn. His shoulders. His wild hair. Something.

"It's the guy who's building the stone house back behind the gravel bank." Steve slows. "You know, the one whose wife moved with their kids to that white house across from the Eagle. This summer."

"One of them's in my class," Rudy says. "Aaron."

All news to me.

Steve pulls up beside the man. "Can I give you a lift?"

He looks our way. His eyes the eyes of the people who tell you they're Jesus. Kind of eyes, you see them coming, you cross over.

"No," he says. That's all. Then his hand sort of brushes the air, shoos us away and he keeps on going.

"You sure?" Steve says, rolling along at the same pace.

"Steve," I hiss, "can't you see he doesn't want . . ."

But he keeps right on talking, "I'm Steve Riglioni. We just live back over the hill there."

The man shakes his head. Doesn't look at us again.

Steve rolls the window up and takes off slow, not to throw dust. "Poor devil," he says.

"What's wrong with him, Papo?" Rudy whispers, touching his father's shoulder.

Steve speeds up. I watch the man, now just a dark spot moving along the edge of the road.

"I don't know, Rudy."

"He looks crazy."

"Yes, he does."

"Maybe you should take him to the hospital."

"Maybe I should, but he wouldn't want me to."

"How do you know?"

"I know."

Steve comes to Route 8, pumps the brakes for the stop sign. I know he must be up to something. He never stops there. The oil light comes on.

"Plus," I say.

Steve puts his arm over the seat and squeezes Rudy's knee. "How about I stop and get some ice cream at Jake's for you and Tess, then we drop you at Peggy's for a few hours. A few hours only. Get your mother out to hear a little music."

I feel an instant lift of spirits.

"Okay to stay with Aunt Peggy for a little while?" I say to Tess, scooting her onto my lap.

Rudy leans over the seat and looks at Steve and me. "She is not our aunt."

“But she loves you like she is, right?” I say, placing my hand on his cheek.

Rudy thinks about this.

“Yes,” Tess says, patting Rudy’s hand. “Yes, she does, Rudy.”

“Where are you going?” Rudy says.

Steve puts the car in park. The oil light goes off.

“We’re going to the Eagle and we will bring you home to sleep in your own bed.

And your mother or I will drive carefully.”

Rudy pushes back in his seat and rolls the window down. “All right.”

“Ice cream,” Tess says.

Steve pulls out onto Route 8. “Cherry Garcia,” he tells her.

“Light this,” Steve says as soon as we get back in the car. I wave to Tess, standing on a chair in Peggy’s front window, already wearing the plastic fire hat. I can tell by her lips she has her siren on. “Wait till we get away from the curb.” Peggy’s next door neighbor is secretary of the Grange.

When he passes the Civil War monument, I take a toke and pass it to him. “Steve, don’t forget what we promised Rudy.”

“I won’t.”

I hear the music before we round the corner at the fire house. Fiddles. A harmonica. My heart ups another notch. “What a good idea,” I say, scooting up against Steve and placing my hand on his thigh.

“That’s right. ‘Be my baby tonight,’” he sings.

A bunch of people stand smoking by the side door of the Presbyterian church.

Steve pulls up to the curb.

“What are you doing? Why are you parking here?” I can see there are still a few places in the Eagle lot across the street. I take the joint from him and hold it down by the seat.

Steve practically has his nose pressed to the windshield. “Tell me I’m stoned, but is that or isn’t that Nooley standing by that church?”

It is Nooley. Nooley who’s been among the missing for several months. Since the winter, in fact. We called and called. Leave a message, all we got. No one around when we went by.

Steve opens the door and calls, “Nooley, you dog, where you been?”

Nooley comes toward us, looking back over his shoulder a few times. The clutch of people disappear inside.

“What’s up?” Steve says, giving him a hug.

I lean out the door. “Nooley,” I say. “you are looking . . . fit as a fiddle.” Nooley, always too thin, always in need of a good scrub – totally made-over: Flesh-colored, not the usual dinge, clean shirt, no holes. Hair shiny.

“Hop in,” Steve says. “Have a toke. Killer weed this year. Some of Bergen’s seed.”

Nooley backs up a few inches, like suddenly we’re infectious. “I’ve got something I have to do now,” he says and starts to turn.

“You okay, Nooley? You in trouble?” Steve asks.

Nooley steps off a little more.

“I was. I am. Not the kind of trouble you mean. Take it easy,” he says and moves toward the church.

Steve hesitates for a second, then starts off after him. Calls out, “Nooley.”

“Don’t you get it?” I holler. Nooley stops, but I can’t hear what he and Steve are saying. I stick the now dead roach in the glove compartment and get out of the car. No odor once I close it up.

Nooley gives me a little wave goodbye, and he’s gone.

“You are not going to believe this,” Steve says.

“Yes, I am.”

“Nooley is going to a . . . ,” Steve looks around and lowers his voice as a distinguished looking guy in an expensive suit passes us going into the church. “. . . an AA meeting.”

“I know.” The band must be on break. The day the music dies. “Let’s go. Just leave the car here.”

“Rena, the Moonies have got him. He’s not himself. I’m going in there and check it out.”

“You’re what? Have you lost your mind? Maybe I better take you to the hospital.” I start for the Eagle.

Steve catches up with me. “Listen, Rena, it’s an open meeting. A speaker’s meeting. Anybody can go. Come on. We’ll sit in the back.”

I keep on walking. The band is making tuning up sounds now. I am ready to dance. “Think of Nooley. You think Nooley wants you barging in? Barging in high?” Steve makes a quick about face.

“Who knows,” he says, “might do us both good.”

Us?

I watch his ponytail bob across the church parking lot, his nice back. Watch him disappear behind that door.

What the hell. I follow.

The minute I open the door, a blast of laughter hits me, booms right up those cold stairs. An AA meeting? I tug my sweater down. Red. Not distinguished, but I know I look good in this color. I give myself a look-over, a smell, on the way down. Nothing incriminating. The hohoho’s lead me to the room. Mostly guys, maybe a dozen, sitting in rows. Maybe four or five women. No generalizations possible, except most of them are yucking it up. No smile from Nooley. Steve, in the back, hands folded in his lap: On his best behavior. An empty chair beside him. I wish I had a name tag that says *Visitor*. A quick glance, nobody I know. One good thing. A sign on the front table says: *Who you see here, what they say here, let it stay here.*

Fine by me.

I expect the distinguished guy to be the leader, but no, an old, been-through-the-wars man gets up. He’s got one of those skid row noses. “Welcome,” he says, beaming me and Steve with an extra gust of heat. “My name is Vic and I’m an alcoholic.” Get me out of here. He hands a plastic sheet to a man in the second row, “Conner, would you read the opening?” Double get me out of here. I give Steve a hard jab in his ribs. In case there is any doubt in his mind as to my level of gratitude for getting me into this.

“Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength, and hope . . .”

My hope was that I'd be dancing by now, the broken washing machine, Mamo this, Mamo that, hushed beneath a soft buzz.

“The only requirement for membership is the desire to stop drinking . . .”

Yes, desire, definitely desire licking along on the edges of that. I give Steve another jab in the ribs. After this Connor stops reading, Vic hands a book to a woman sitting on the side. A woman about my age. Late twenties maybe. Pretty. What is she doing here?

“Roberta, could you start us off by reading the First Step? Page 4 in Daily Reflections.”

A lot of people already have these little gray books open. I've got to tell you one of the parts I hated most about school was the going up and down the rows, lamp is a noun, run is a verb.

“Step One,” Roberta says, “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol . . .”

And no clue how many steps we are going to have to climb. No way to count up and be ready, doze off until it's your turn. Steve jitters beside me. How's he going to fake through that one if the book comes his way? Steve is one of those people who turn their p's into d's. Road signs on the thruway, a problem, if I'm not along to navigate. All his brothers. And looks like Rudy as well. Dyslexia, they call it.

Roberta passes the book to the man next to her. “Two. Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves . . .”

The God thing. I see the only way I'm going to get through this is to do what I used to call the wile-aways. Tacked here and there on the walls are dog-eared posters:

AA=Attitude Adjustment. Right next to that: **Live and Let Live.** Another one says:

H.A.L.T-Hungry, Angry, Lonely, Tired. Couldn't have put it better myself.

Everybody closes his or her book. Evidently they've made it to the top of the stairs.

Change or Die. Triple get me out of here.

"Now I'd like to introduce our speaker." Vic nods to the distinguished looking man, "Jim." The man stands up and goes behind the long table. He looks out, eye contact with every one of us. I get the anxiety-lump. What you'd expect this guy to say is something about why the stock-market is a wise investment. Instead, he says, of course, "Hello, my name is Jim and I'm an alcoholic." And I'm sorry, but I am not going there. I've got enough sad stories of my own and a washing machine that will no longer agitate, that needs an Attitude Adjustment big time.

I take myself to Elsewhere with one that works every time: A my name is Alice, and my husband's name is Al. We come from Akron and we sell . . .

Steve gives me a poke. I've made it all the way to Z and I'm on my second round. Always more challenging: A my name is Athena and my husband's name is . . .

"Rena, get in the circle," he says.

No way out of this one. You just wait 'til I get you home.

"Let's say the Serenity Prayer," Vic says.

I've got Steve on one side and Vic on the other. Both squeezing my hands like they're going down.

Finally we're out of there. Steve and I, the first ones up the stairs and across the parking lot, lickety split. We are at one on this. Steve lights us both a cigarette and we take that smoke in like it's water and we just crawled into the oasis.

We can see Nooley would like to go another way, but his truck is right behind our car, so he can't hide.

"Don't suppose you'd like to join us at the Eagle," Steve says. "Sounds like a good band."

Nooley shakes his head No. "Got to get going," he says. He gets in his truck. It rumbles. He signals. We watch him disappear down the road. No, see you later. No, drop by. Nooley, our friend since way back in California.

"This makes me sad," Steve says. "This breaks my heart."

"Me, too," I say.

We start toward the Eagle. They're playing a blue song. It makes me want to sit down on that beat-up porch and cry. I go to open the door into the bar, but instead I turn to Steve.

"Yeah," he says, "might as well go get the kids. My heart's not in it."

Rudy throws his plastic bag on the back seat and gets in. He looks at us with suspicion. "What's wrong?" he says.

I settle Tess on my lap. She's sound asleep, but will not let me pry the fire hat from her fingers. It cuts into my leg.

"You're early," he says, tapping me on the shoulder.

"Just not a very good band," I say.

Rudy shakes his head. Tell him another one.

Steve drives slowly up past the Inn, then up Fyler Hill. "You know," he says.

"Maybe I will take the pledge."

I close my eyes. I'm going to have to wring every piece out by hand. Icy water.

The jeans. The sweatshirts.

Steve sighs. "Be a good thing for both of us. Yeah, I think I'm going to take the pledge."

It's dark now. The hills have disappeared. No stars.

"Go right home, rip those plants up," I say. "Glug, glug whiskey down the drain."

"Soon," he says. "Maybe even tomorrow."

You believe that, you believe anything.