

Ginnah Howard

## MESSAGE '93

Mark shifted his messenger bag and veered the bike to the right: catch the fast lane down the center. The bus on his left pressed him. He banged hard on the door. Fucker moves over another foot, bike's going to be on the hood of the taxi. He banged again. "Check your mirror, you mother." He dropped in behind the limousine and glanced at his manifest: *5565 Madison Ave. Suite 886. Rush.* He needed a signature. That'd slow him down. He ran the light.

No batteries for the walkman, a drum payment due on the fifteenth, whenever that was. Down to rolling his own. Lyrics for a song: "Bike Messenger Blues." Plus the major motif: And my girlfriend's pregnant. Only 4,000 songs exploring similar heartaches. Everybody rolling his own.

Kid about to step off the curb. He swerved to the left. "Look out, Buddy." *4556, 4560.* Next block. Traffic lighter now. He made a U-turn – honking of horns – gave the driver a smile and a wave, flipped his toe clips, and eased the bike to a stop by a good pole. No need to remove the front tire in this neighborhood. Doorman across the way had the eagle eye. He wrapped the chain twice around the forks and pushed hard on the u-lock till he heard the click, then glanced back at the bike while he slid the bag to his chest to keep it from catching in the revolving door. Even though he'd sprayed it black to cover the brand name, to tone down its resale value, a good thief could tell what a beauty of a track bike it was just by its silhouette.

He pressed 8 and stepped to the back of the elevator. The thing was, he and Marlene should not have a child. Level of chaos so extreme it'd already zoomed off the chart. Have to X every *No* on the *Ready to be a Good Parent* test.

“Excuse me,” he said to the coats and ties and stepped out. His own fashion statement: padded bike shorts over his best navy long johns. His sneakers squeaked on the marble floor. People beavering away beyond the opaque glass. Gnaw, gnaw. Floating it all over to the big lodge. 882, 884, 886. *Berlinger, Smythe, and Co.* He unzipped his bag, thumbed through to the right envelope, and turned the shiny brass knob. No one at the reception desk. Rush, rush, here I am. All the doors closed. He checked his sheet. Next delivery only a few blocks away. Still having to prove himself to his new employers: Meteor Messenger Service. Needed wings on his canvas All Stars. Especially since he had no money to get high, his preferred means of travel. He drummed out a catchy little number on the desk. No response from the doors. No perky *May I help you?* Give it a couple of minutes before he upped the volume. He set his bag on the floor and settled into the padded chair.

No ifs, no buts, they had to get the money for the clinic together immediately. No time to wait around for the whole welfare trip. Every day longer they put it off, the sadder, the worse it got. Him, forced into the *Let's Be Rational* part of the duo. Him? More proof of how truly off the charts the situation was. Marlene? Marlene kept her toe shoes in the oven, for god's sake. Not that there were any less roaches in there. Maybe because the neighborhood junkies might not consider it. Whenever she wasn't practicing or headed to dance class, into the oven they went. She wouldn't say why. For him, it was just one more piece of evidence that they could not have this baby. Got to call the clinic, see how much it costs, and come up with the money somehow. Aaron? Address unknown. No hope there. And he absolutely was not going to ask his mother. No windfalls headed Marlene's way, either. Tell my father I'm pregnant, ask him for money? Marlene's frequent refrain when she'd been talking enough to do any refraining.

Hadn't even let her dad know when she was in the psych ward. One thing in their favor: It wasn't February.

West 28<sup>th</sup> quiet. Flower shops all closed, but still the smell of roses. Roses and rain coming. And, of course, the smell of gutter garbage, always the gutter garbage and exhaust. Overall, not a bad beginning at Meteor. Impressed them with his speed. Rough, no pay coming for the first two weeks, and he could hardly lay the abortion thing on them. No gig money in sight, either. The group just trying to find the time to put together a new demo. He hoisted his bike up onto the stoop and checked the windows on the fourth floor. Open. Marlene was back from the diner early. No dinner tips, but maybe she'd gone to a payphone and made the call. If she wasn't too low, got to put together a plan. That evening. Not tomorrow. Now.

The last flight was always a killer. Finding this dog-sit in a loft with them only having to kick in \$300 a month, a place where he could play his drums, room for Marlene to work out, a streak of unusual good fortune—a vast improvement on squat-living where they'd had to go in through the steel doors in the sidewalk. But with each flight of stairs, his bike always gained another fifty pounds. No sympathy forthcoming from Marlene if he came in huffing: “smoke, smoke, smoke them cigarettes,” all she'd say when she was still saying much of anything. Twenty-seven and already his lungs black, his hair going gray. Just like his father's. Just like you, Dad, in don't want to count the ways.

As soon as he put the key in the lock, Lovely began to bark. The thud of her Great Dane bounce against the other side sent a tremor through the frame. “Hello, Lovely, it's me.” He turned the key and when the door didn't open, he unlocked the flange-lock, too. Quadruple the barricade, but if they wanted to steal his drums, all they had to do was blow-torch out the center

panel of the door like they did the sculptor's on the first floor. And he could not bear to spray-paint his new set of drums – his beautiful black Pearls – to cut down on their resale value. He kept them under a ratty old comforter, but that was even more lame than the oven.

Lovely embraced him, her paws planted on his shoulder, her wet tongue covering him with kisses. Marlene's leg stretched along the barre, her chest to her knee. Her pale, perfect arm extended. She didn't turn her head.

"Hey," he said. "You got off early. That's good."

Her only response a sigh of breathing correctly. At least three months along, but her body in denial, too.

He lifted Lovely's paws, and once all of her was down, gave her a good scratch under her chin. Then he wheeled the bike over by his drums. He pulled off the comforter—just looking at them helped. He surveyed the rest of the room: place needed some attention. Trash can spilling over. Sink full of dishes. Mattress stacked with a mix of dirty clothes and wadded covers. Been a while since either of them had been up for playing house. Have to do a thorough before Gregory, the loft owner, returned from his parents' in Oregon. At least Gregory's space on the balcony was still tidy. Nice guy, Gregory. Going to give his mom and dad the ultimate bad news: HIV positive. Gregory—willing to let them continue the share if the three of them could keep it together. Along the *Let's Be Rational* lines, this seemed like a stretch.

Marlene had shifted to the other leg.

"Had an okay day on the bike. No fuck ups. Made good time. Told me to come in tomorrow."

Marlene looked past him—sad—but said nothing.

Marlene, Marlene. Low, but not so low she couldn't make herself do her work-out. A good sign. But too late to call the clinic today.

"Going to take Lovely for a w-a-l-k." Lovely began to leap. "You want us to wait for you?"

Maybe a twist of the knot on the back of her head, her black hair pulled so tight it slanted her eyes.

Lovely's leash was not on the hook by the door. Not on the sink. The refrigerator. "Lovely, be lovely and stop jumping. Please." He lifted random piles of stuff. What he wouldn't give for a pack of Camels. Flip the box open, pull out a firm smoke, flick his lighter, suck in, *ahhh*. "Any idea where the leash is?"

Maybe another shake of her head.

Marlene was balanced on one leg, her other leg arched behind her. Swan. She could do this forever.

Either of them remembering to put the leash on the hook was another matter. Mark took a piece of clothesline from the drawer and fastened that to Lovely's collar. "Be good if we could talk when I get back. You don't have to bother with the flange." But before they got to the first landing, he heard the bar drop into place.

Marlene was a lump under the piles on the mattress when they returned. Lovely joined her. The message was clear: I don't want to think about it. She'd been like that for weeks. He opened the Bugler can—getting low—dumped a bunch of tobacco on a sheet of paper and began to roll the cigarettes he was going to need for tomorrow. Progress for sure. He'd even

scrounged a couple of Camel boxes from the trash to carry them in. “Marlene, it’d be good if you came up out of there. I think you know what we have to do.”

She didn’t answer. Only Lovely’s tail beat up and down whenever he spoke.

He clipped off the ragged shreds on the ends of the first cigarette, lit up, and started to roll another. He’d like to beat out some of this on the drums, but that was not the best strategy for getting Marlene to surface. One foot in front of the other was the direction he needed to focus on. He sat and rolled, phrases of a song bleeping up, then flattening with each drag, his heart beat, beat, beating in the quiet.

He carefully placed the cigarettes in the boxes. Then he bagged up the trash and set it by the door. The dog rose. “Not yet, Lovely.” He turned on the light in the bathroom and turned it off again: the condition of the tub and toilet beyond his current level of pretend. Instead, he began on the dishes. First, he emptied the sink quietly so as not to jangle Marlene, Marlene who was only a few months back from Bellevue—delusions extraordinaire: Her name was Mary and somebody kept fucking up the message the angel left on her machine. Made the approach to ending this pregnancy tricky indeed.

Once all the dirty dishes were up on the drain, he scooped out the gunk that had slid to the bottom: strings of spaghetti, bits of Chinese take-out and Cheerios, hunks of Lovely’s Kibbles all glommed together. He held his nose with one hand and used a spatula to shovel out with the other.

Once the dishes were done, all but the soakers, he sorted through the piles to figure out what was dirty, what was clean. He gave Marlene’s tights, his black pants the smell test and stuffed them both into a raunchy pillow case. He put together three loads. When he began to count out five dollars in quarters from Marlene’s tip money, there were signs of life beneath the

blankets. Another good indicator. “I’m taking five dollars for the laundromat,” he said. No response. If he’d said ‘for cigarettes,’ maybe she would’ve popped out to protest.

He folded everything else and sorted them into neat stacks: mine, hers, towels, other. Then he swept, wetting the edge of a newspaper to create a dust pan to push the mouse turds and tobacco, the dead water bugs, the city grit onto. Little trick learned from you, Dad. Though something more substantive might have been in order, eh?

He sat down at his drums, made a few adjustments of the cymbals—his top of the line Zildjians—and mimed a roll. Place was looking better. A little breeze lifted the sheet they’d tacked across the window. Still the smell of roses four flights up. Maybe when he coaxed Marlene out into all this order, her mind would clear long enough to hear what any benign angel was bound to say: *Call the clinic.*

The sound of a car alarm woke him. Lovely went to the window and looked out. Marlene was curled up so tight he had trouble lifting her arm, turning her wrist to see the time. 8:30. Shit. He had to be at Meteor by eleven. Marlene was probably supposed to work lunch. She’d been basically comatose since he got home yesterday, so she might not even go to work. Not much time to pull the whole thing together. “Marlene?” Her back to him, her back always to him these days. He jiggled her shoulder. She remained limp. “Marlene, how about if we go down to the corner and at least call, see how much it costs, tell them you’re almost three months along?” He felt her body tighten. She was in there. “Find out if you decide to do it, about how long you’d have to wait?” Her body still rigid, but no words forthcoming.

He got up and pulled on his bike shorts, his shoes. “I could call, but they’re not going to let me make any arrangements. They’re going to want to talk to you. You’re the one who has to say, ‘This is what I have to do.’”

He tied the clothesline around the meter and gave Lovely a sorry pat when she tried to press into the phone booth behind him. He checked his list of questions. He didn’t want to forget something and have to get up for this again. Already having to quell the rising urge to walk over to West Side Highway and stick his thumb out, the urge to turn his back on this situation until it disappeared. He dialed the number.

Four hundred dollars. Since she was heading into the second trimester, since the situation sounded difficult, they could probably see her for counseling in the next few days and go from there. Yes, of course, she had to be the one to make the final arrangements. He pressed his forehead against the cold metal: get the 600, zap Marlene out of the zombie state, arrange the time off from work. He pushed the phone booth door open slowly so as not to catch the dog’s nose. “I don’t know, Lovely, but somehow, we’ve got to bring this off.”

Black strands of hair over the pillow, the only proof that Marlene was still part of the heap. He reached in and found her arm: 9:15. He had to be headed uptown by 10:30 to get to Meteor by 11. Marlene needed to do lunch if there was any hope of putting together the rent on time. “Marlene, I just called the clinic. They seemed to fully understand our situation. I’ve figured out a way to get the money. If you call this morning, chances are good they can talk to you, help us this week.” He slowly lifted off the first layer of blankets. She didn’t move. He folded back the sheet. She opened her eyes, the first time she’d really looked at him in days. Tears.



“If your father had made your mother do this, you wouldn’t even be here.”

He didn’t say that at this moment, such a release didn’t strike him as such a bad option.

“Marlene, what about your life-long dream to be a dancer? We’re struggling just to take care of ourselves. Look around you: Is what we’ve got going here, a world you want to bring a baby into?”

She sat up. He took hold of her and set her on her feet. He led her into the bathroom. “See if you can get yourself together enough to make the call. Just make an appointment to talk to the counselor, then see what you feel up to from there.” He pulled the door closed, heard the water running. He counted out the money for the calls, then gave the snare a pat, threw the comforter over the set, and tucked it under the edge of the bass.

The quarters, the dial tone, the number, the extension. He kept his eye on Marlene, so she wouldn’t fade away. “Could I speak to Katherine Barker?” He put his hand on Marlene’s shoulder while he waited. “This is Mark Marek. I spoke to you about half an hour ago . . . Yes, my girlfriend, Marlene Dashel, is right here.” He handed the phone to Marlene.

Marlene listened for what felt like forever. Then she said, “Nine o’clock tomorrow.” She left the receiver dangling and started back toward the loft.

He bent and gave Lovely a reassuring scratch. Then he dropped in the last quarters. A sleepy voice answered. “It’s Mark. Yeah, you know the Pearls, are you still interested? . . . Got two more fifty dollar payments . . . I’ll know definitely by tomorrow . . . I could let you have them for six hundred. Have to get the money to me in the next day or two.”

The drums or the bike: without the drums, he can't make music; without the bike, he can't work. Break my heart, break my heart. He untied the leash from the meter. "Just a few more days of faking our way through, right, Lovely?"

See why you weren't quite up to it, Dad: this going on, one foot in front of the other, a real heavy-duty effort.

A few hours for the whole thing is what they said. Then a few days of rest. Been three hours already. The woman working at the desk, answering the phone, older, no-nonsense face. At least that was heartening.

Place full of waiting women. Women went in; women came out. Young and not young, all colors. None of them smiling. Him, the only male. Every half hour or so, he went down to the street to smoke. Woman at the desk saw him go, saw him come back. Main thing when Marlene came out, he should be there.

"Well?" he said as soon as he got off the elevator.

"Go on down and flag a taxi," the woman said. "By the time you get back up here, she'll be ready to go home."

He stepped out into the street, raised his hand.

Home? Home? Marlene might be about to walk out that door, but going home wasn't what they were about here.

"Clean sheets," was all she said. Then she curled on her side and within minutes little puffs of breath the only signs of life. He watched her face, her lashes black against the faint blue

skin below her eyes, the rest of her white, see-through pale. She hadn't burrowed in. Maybe in a few days she'd come through this, be steady enough to be on her own.

Because, Dad, one lesson you taught me for sure: not much further along this road, it's all going to bust up and go down.