

Red, White and Blue

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By Allison Fine

Holt, Michigan, 1975:

“Some people are incredibly happy just before they die. My mother, Carol, was--I’m sure of it.”

Cartesia Violet Miller

One

The soft wind of a Michigan May wound out of the sky like an early childhood lullaby that had been heard and echoed a thousand times over a thousand years yet never sang quite in the same tune twice. The roads were long outside town and many times a car or truck traveled upon those roads, knowing or not knowing where it was headed. The people inside might be listening to music or talking or not talking or thinking or feeling without thinking. Either way, they weren’t headed toward any sort of time-limited real estate—it was a no-sale zone and the experience was un-gated, limitless, dawdling and filled with compromise.

So it was like that on a very sunny day in 1975.

Cartesia Violet was her name and nobody else made it up. It just came out of the mouth of her father, Garnet Miller, a handy man and millwright from Bishopville, Lee County, S. Carolina, telling her mother, Carol Oliver, a young, dazzling girl from

Nassau County, where the rich lived on Long Island, *this girl is named Cartesia Violet*, so what was Carol to say?

Garnet and Carol just looked at the little, hard and angry, screwed up face of the bawling baby upon birth and Garnet said: *Cartesia Violet, whaddaya think honey?*

Carol did not die in childbirth although some said she did. It was not the fact. Carol died of an aneurism about five weeks after Cartesia was born and it had nothing to do with the birth. At least, that's what doctor's thought. There was a weakness in the wall of one of her cranial arteries and it just burst. She was on her way to the toilet. Cartesia was asleep in the little cot Garnet had made for her, and just as Carol leaned down to get onto the toilet a great flash occurred and she hit the floor with a bang. Garnet was outside in the garage fixing the 1962 Ford Classic they had since Carol's father gave it to them. It was never running well and they were always fixing it and this year, the year of Cartesia's birth, it was already thirteen years old and on the way out.

Garnet heard the wailing of his little girl and it wouldn't stop after five minutes. He knew Carol was a good mother so far, so he figured she'd just fallen asleep. But he went inside to pick the baby up and make sure things were fine, anyway. They were not. He lost his heart to Carol and he never even called it love, but love was all it was and his whole life died with hers. Cartesia was the only blasted thing left of his love and he wouldn't ever let her go, but that day he just held the screaming baby and stared at Carol's dead body on the bathroom floor.

But Carol's dead body did nothing to ease him in this terrible moment of hardship and he knew it was hardship; hardship now and for the future. He didn't think to call his parents—his dad would probably be off somewhere looking for parts, and his mother-- they were not to be called upon. Frank and Bootsie thought him beneath their family and a horrible blot on their daughter's life and now they would be sure to think it true. If he asked for their help he'd never see Cartesia again and the baby was all he had of someone who was all he'd ever have.

He held tight to the screaming infant, a small, taut, red-faced bundle bawling herself into a frenzy, and then, leaving Carol's body on the bathroom floor, went into their bedroom where the little cot they'd made up for her sat next to their double bed. On the side table was a slab of board they used for changing and a box of diapers underneath. Reaching for a diaper, Garnet started singing to the baby as he placed her gently upon the board and pulled the cloth strap around her tummy he'd been so proud of making. It was natural for him to sing and singing to this baby was the breath of life in an otherwise inert existence. Pulling the diaper off, putting the clean one on, he sang the song he knew best:

*Well I love my baby
sweet and fair
you've got the sky in your eye
the sun in your hair
I rock you to sleep most every night
And sing you this song
While I hold you tight.*

*Sleep my baby
the angels keep you from harm
and your father above
keeps you safe and warm*

*sleep my baby
 nestled in your mama's arms
 sleep my baby
 the angels keep you from harm.*

*My little baby you be sleeping soon
 Kissed by the golden stars and moon
 I have just one wish for you
 May your every dream come true.*

*Now baby you be sleepin now
 I'm done with the song for now
 Tomorrow night I'll sing again
 Until then little one
 Amen Amen.*

“Where’d you get that song?” Carol once asked.

“I dunno,” he told her, “just made it up I guess.”

Cartesia quit crying and then it suddenly hit on his brain: he’d have to figure out the bottle thing because Carol was nursing with her breasts. He had a strange thought that if he put the baby to the dead woman’s breast it would still give milk. Carrying Cartesia over to the bathroom, still singing the song, but with a tremble to his ragged breathing, he knelt down and put her little mouth onto the end of Carol’s breast, prodding gently Cartesia’s mouth onto the nipple. The baby sucked and sucked and lo and behold—milk came out. The skin on his dead wife was still warm. He figured this would be the last suck on mama’s tit so best let the baby enjoy it.

A few minutes passed, he didn’t know how long; the only sound Cartesia’s lustful sucking and the traffic outside. He knew he’d have to call somebody pretty soon. After the baby finished one side he put her on the other—*might as well milk this for all it’s worth*, he spoke aloud, with no sense of irony but a very loud rumbling

in his gut. Maybe this wasn't right? But who's to know? Back and forth this query went until the baby hiccupped and lolled her head back with total satisfaction and Garnet knew she was done. Putting the snug little bundle over his shoulder he got up, burping her gently with one hand, patting and rubbing and waiting until he heard the sound that told him this feeding session was complete.

Two

They met at a gas station in Buffalo, New York. Garnet went there to go hunting deer in Erie County with some guys who knew some other dudes from upstate New York and somehow they got stuck in Buffalo getting drunk in a series of bars and staying in the living room of a friend of a friend on May Street or around there, by the railroad.

At the gas station there was Carol passing through town with some friends on her way to visit some other friends at some college somewhere north. Garnet took one look at Carol and knew something, but the coil of the thought did more than flicker in his brain. He followed her car; she stopped, got out of the passenger seat and challenged him.

“What the hell are you doing, boy?”

She was skinny, so was he. In those days people were a lot skinnier than they are now. Before fast food and corn syrup took over the bodies of Americans. He looked her up and down, the way a guy from the scraps of the south will do, and she stood her ground.

“Let’s go drinking,” he said, and she thought *yeah*. A nineteen-year-old girl on a binge, why not?

They went on a three-day bar hopping sex-crazed spree and then abruptly she took off for Long Island. He wrote her postcards in his scrawl. She answered them back on stationary with a rose smell and pink initials at the top. Her father confiscated the postcards when he found them and forbid her to write him again.

She was sent off to college—a smart girl, she got mostly A's (a B in Calculus and a C+ in Chemistry) and went upstate to Vassar, but she didn't last long. There was ferocity in Carol and something in her wanted to live how “the other half lived.”

After Carol dropped out of Vassar she stayed in Poughkeepsie and got a job at a small restaurant. The money from tips was good, she could come and go as she pleased without having to consult with her parents or deal with their Long Island value judgments, and the other kids that worked there were fun. They all went drinking after work, they had boyfriends and girlfriends and parents in other places. Carol was accepted just as she was and no one knew anything about the money in her background. She was just Carol.

Just Carol kept in touch with Garnet, whose skinny tight little ass and sassy way of teasing her made her nipple-ready and horny; maybe set to hop on a plane to S. Carolina. She planned to tell her father about visiting a friend of hers in the south and he, generous as always toward his favorite daughter, sent her money for the plane.

For his part Garnet had never been anyone's hero and he didn't know the meaning of the word, his father and uncle were sure not his heroes. Oh, maybe he had a hero in a comic book somewhere when he was ten, but that was long over. At twenty-one, he just set about wondering how in hell he could turn him and Carol into *The Millers*. How was he going to do that?

“Someday everything is going to end and somebody's gunna pull the plug,” he told her during one of their many fraught phone calls, her end of the call made

while standing in a phone booth in town where she'd ridden her bike from the family compound in Amagansett, and his end talking on the phone off the kitchen wall of parent's two bedroom shit hole.

"Who is somebody?"

"Anybody. Anything. You're walking and a beam from a building hits you—you're dead. You make a wide left turn and somebody barrels into you from your blind spot."

"Of course. Of course."

"It's all random shit."

"It's always been random shit, Garnet."

"So we got to take advantage of the time we have."

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know."

Carol waited and waited. She knew what he was meaning to say but she also knew damn well she was not going to say it for him. This was his task and she hoped he was up to it.

"I mean—"

She sat still inside the phone booth, breathing out into the hot, stuffy air of the enclosed space. A young mother with two kids, one in her arms and one in a stroller, started banging on the glass.

"Just a minute!" Carol shouted. "Please, Garnet, I got to go."

"I mean Carol we ought to think about getting married. Don't you think?"

“We’re young. And neither one of us has an education or a decent job or a career or anything.”

The banging got louder.

“Hang on!”

“It doesn’t matter, but I have skills in car repair and as a millwright and repairing machines—that kind of thing. I have a talent for it.”

“And you’re a philosopher.”

“I never thought of it that way but—“

They hardly knew each other. Neither one of them had a clue what things were about. From Carol’s end it was a blessed noblesse oblige life of entitlement, summers in Amagansett and private country day schools when she was a kid. From Garnet’s side it was hard, dirty work for his dad and uncle in the auto parts shop, the family cramped and crowded in a two-bedroom bungalow too small, his mother’s smell of cigarettes and whiskey, his father’s smell of oil and gas and tar and a sense that he was destined for something nobler. Carol could make him worthier than he had ever imagined, he knew that.

“All right. Let’s talk some more about it,” she told him. The woman outside was trying to push the door in, unsuccessfully. “There’s a mother with two babies outside needing to make a call.”

“All right.”

“Don’t write me any more cards or anything—my father confiscates them all. I’ll call you again in a couple of days.” She kissed the phone.

“All right Carol my Carol, I love you!”

The sound of his voice making the love word made her feel a tremble deep inside the pit of her stomach. She knew he would be the one she could not get away from no matter how hard her father tried to stop it. It was unstoppable. That was the way love was then between young people. Or perhaps the way it always has been but it's hard to tell.

“Jesus!” the mother cried as Carol stepped out in her bright white Keds tennis shoes and short blue shorts. “I have an emergency here! I was about to run get the police!”

“Don't bother,” Carol smiled diffidently and walked away like a girl about to change the way things operated.

The business of Carol's father was a matter, indeed. A proud, brilliant man with a very successful law firm and a contracting business “on the side,” Frank Oliver was the kind of man we now know as the “greatest generation,” a man who understood duty and obligation, respect and patriotism as livable behavior patterns, not archetypal words meant to manipulate, inculcate and enchain men into performing the what was expected of them. Some of them were nothing more than walking mannerisms sheathed in half-baked idealism, but they never felt that way about it. For the men of Frank's era and class it was the way you behaved, it was how you showed up, it was the right thing to do. He had become, like many from this deprived generation who had witnessed depression and world war and death and

polio and a host of other awful things as children, a repository for the American dream.

Even though Frank came from money, his father had lost it all investing in stocks, his Uncle had been a veterinarian who got diabetes, an enlarged heart and died at thirty-six leaving his wife and two kids with nothing. His mother had to stop her education at Radcliffe mid-Junior year because Frank's father insisted they had to get married.

Frank flunked the army exam because of his trick knee, (earned playing High School basketball) and was not going overseas, although his brother Nathaniel (whom he envied because of it) was a medic in Italy during the war. Because of his 160 IQ and brilliance in Math Frank got drafted to work in the Pentagon as head fiscal officer for the War Production Board in Washington and the field. Carol's mother, Bootsie, (a name she got while attending private school as a child—her real name was Elizabeth, her sisters called her Betsy—but no one in the immediate family would call her Bootsie, until it was inevitable that it was the only name that stuck), shared visions of a political career in Washington, possibly even President some day? *Every young, ambitious boy dreams of being President don't they?* Bootsie asked over and over at dinner and various other times, just to make sure everyone knew what was on her mind. At least boys had presidential dreams back then, in 1942.

Bootsie finished Junior college majoring in communications or something like that, leaving her parents surprised and upset, (they had bigger dreams for Bootsie—physicist at NYU or perhaps a PhD in Astronomy?) Bootsie was a brilliant student and

loved science, she had fleeting moments imagining herself as a female astrophysicist or something, but she loved Frank more.

They had a quick wedding at the house in Rye, with just relatives college and school friends attending, and her siblings of course, and after a short honeymoon at Niagara Falls, off the newly wed Olivers went to Washington D.C. They rented a Duplex in subsidized housing for war production employees. Bootsie wore short one-piece suits with strappy heels and in 1944, just as the war was ending and Frank's job with the War Production was over, his political dreams were shattered. Zealous efforts to expose certain things he uncovered took care of that. Bootsie handled it well; she had other things on her mind. Carol's older brother Louis was born on Frank and Bootsie's third Anniversary, August 17, 1944.

Perhaps Frank's fanatical divulging of graft, corruption and questionable bookkeeping practices uncovered while performing his meticulous accounting tasks lost him a career in Washington. He was offered the choice of resigning with honor and letters of recommendation or being fired. Frank always did the right thing. He resigned. The Presidential dreams died there.

Carol was born a few years later in 1949. The family had already moved back to Rye so Frank could go to law school and Bootsie could become the Long Island mother and wife she felt destined to be. She bought a Valentina dress and wore her mother's pearls for the occasion of Frank's graduation from NYU law school, top of his class.

“Who is this loser?” Frank pushed his tone a bit higher than usual to Carol. She had called him from her girlfriend’s summer home on Martha’s Vineyard.

“No, I am not going into that dad, with your implications that—“

“This is not an implication, it’s a plain statement of fact. This guy is some blue collar loser from the south, for God’s sake!”

“What’s wrong with the south?”

“Nothing!” Frank exploded. He had no idea what he was feeling but it wasn’t the usual, although this child, of his four the oldest, was the one who always made him angry. His love and care for her was great, his expectations for her even greater, and his capacity for disappointment came easily for a child that would doom the entire family.

Somebody told Garnet about great paying jobs at Motor Wheel in Lansing and off the Millers went. They had eloped before even meeting her family. It was a quick decision. She went down to Bishopville and they got married by the Sherriff. Frank bought the ticket, knowing it was probably a mistake, but Carol presented a convincing case.

“I’m not going to stay long. I just want to meet his family. It’ll be good for me. Good experience. He comes from hard working people. They—“

“They want to latch onto a rich girl like you and make sure their lazy son of a bitch son inherits your money. Just don’t marry the guy. Have your fling and then get

back to business.”

“Business?”

“Finding a nice young man who can earn a living and support a family. His family just sees you as a meal ticket, sweetheart, don’t you see that? Men like that—they want only one thing!”

“And what is that?”

“Some woman to push around and live off!”

Carol never thought that was true.

Frank was hoping she’d go down there and realize just how bad it was. *There’s nothing romantic about poverty!* He thought. *She’ll see the hopelessness of marrying someone like that and come back home with some sense.*

Garnet’s father was somewhere in Aiken county hunting for auto parts, something or other, but his mother, Gail, she of the dyed red hair and long house dresses, was there, and afterwards they had sandwiches, cake and ice cream at her house.

“We’re driving to Michigan, mom,” Garnet told his mom while they chomped on the butter rum cake Gail had made from scratch.

“OK, well be careful will you? No drinking on the road or anything!”

Carol laughed. “No—we’ll stop at a motel or something on the way.”

Kisses all around, and off they went in the 62 Ford Classic Gail gave them. It’d been sitting around in the drive waiting for Garnet to fix it and his dad wouldn’t be back for it anytime soon. He hated working for his father at Miller’s Auto Parts, the

shop his father and Uncle Clive owned, and the pay and benefits for working at the auto plants was spectacular in those days. Factory work was the new boon to the working class, although nobody said *working class* anymore. Up north you could be middle class with a factory job and a little house with a back yard the size of nothing. Carol felt that Garnet's dreams were just fine for the moment, for the now. She had some trust, though God knows where she got it. She was already pregnant anyway, though she didn't plan on telling until they were on the road.

Three

Sitting down in the one large chair in the living room, a ragged piece of junk they found at a thrift job on the main drag, Garnet balanced the baby on one knee and grabbed the phone off the lamp table next to him. Who should he call? Their neighbors down the road were most likely out, but he dialed them anyway. Annette answered.

“Annette?”

“Yeah. Who is it?”

“Garnet.”

“Oh hey—how all you doing?”

“Fine. Oh—well—we got some problems here. Kind of a situation. Are you at work?”

“No—I’m on my way to the store to pick up some stuff. What’s—“

“Is Joe home?”

“No—he’s at his mom’s. She’s got some troubles with her knee. Are you okay?”

“It’s Carol?” he said it like a question but he didn’t know why he did that.

She could hear it in his voice and something gripped her; she felt the word *tragedy* drift through her usually cluttered mind. It blotted all that other stuff out.

“What?”

“Carol—she fell in the bathroom. Something’s wrong.”

“How wrong?”

“I dunno. But she’s not moving.”

“I’ll be right there. Where’s the baby?”

“In my lap.”

“Okay. Hang on. I’ll be right there.”

The baby played in his lap with soft baby sounds and a simple way about her. Garnet touched her face and her fingers, put his nose to her nose, the little chin looked like Carol’s little chin. He thought about crying but he didn’t. It seemed like a very long while before he looked up and saw Annette banging at the front door, Cradling the baby in his left arm he heaved up from the chair to open the door. The day was sunny and warm; he could feel and hear wind moving through the leaves of the Sycamore trees alongside the street. The one large Maple in their yard was filling up with its summer greenery—Garnet reckoned this would be the most beautiful spring he ever witnessed except—

“Let me take the baby,” Annette said, her arms out.

“Oh no.” Garnet held on tight.

“Ok. Where’s Carol?”

“In the bathroom.”

Annette rushed toward the bathroom, her big man’s jacket flapping, the pockets filled with all the stuff she always carried around with her: wallet, glasses case, keys, Kleenex pack, lip balm and in the summer, sun tan lotion. Garnet wondered why she never carried a purse but it never seemed that she liked purses much.

Annette didn't have time to reflect on how out of it Garnet was, she knew that something was adrift in this man the first time she met him, but she liked Carol from the start. A young girl, obviously from some good roots, who'd done a shot-gun marriage to this guy. Annette decided to accept that Carol made a desperate choice and befriended the Millers out of some kind of concern. She didn't think Garnet was going to do it (*whatever it was*) and anyways, he was at the factory all the time, driving in that one heap of a car of theirs, leaving Carol stranded at the house. When they first came to town and were staying at that little rented apartment in town, she met Carol at the grocery store and Joe found them the house on Irving Road, just half a mile from their place. (*Better way to keep an eye on things*). When Carol had to see the doctor Annette took her for the visits and got the medicine she needed because Carol developed a little bit of high blood pressure during the pregnancy.

"Gestational. Nothing serious," Dr. August said and prescribed relaxation and rest, long walks and an aspirin a day.

Those long walks were tainted with the kinds of depressing thoughts that came up inside of Carol. Fragments like *what're we going to do? I can't work and Garnet's gone at the factory.. What am I gunna do? How is the baby—could we---my folks..*" On and on like that. Getting pregnant, being in Holt, Michigan far from everything she knew, even if she didn't like it back home, this was certainly not what she dreamed of when she thought of marriage and a baby and... the day she told her father on the phone about the marriage and how she was pregnant. Bootsie could

be heard in the background yelling, smoking; screaming and throwing things into the sink.

“You’re married to that god damn loser?”

“He’s not what you think, dad!”

“And what is he, Carol, just what is he?”

“He’s my husband. He’s my friend.”

“He’s your way to just make all of this completely irrelevant, Carol. All the money on your education, you quitting school for God’s sake—just a minute Bootsie!” Bootsie grabbed the phone from Frank.

“Carol you come home right now. We can get you into any school you want. Finish your education—finish—Frank! I’m talking!”

Frank had grabbed the phone back.

“Carol. Your brothers and your little sister miss you—they need you—you need to come home. You’re the oldest for Christ’s sake—you have to set an example!”

“An example dad? Are you kidding? My life is here now, with Garnet. He’s my family now. I’m grown up dad. I’m not your little girl anymore.”

“You’ll always be—you’re only nineteen for God’s sake, Carol!”

“And I’m expecting your first grandchild, dad. I think you should know.”

“What? You’re what?”

“I’m pregnant with our child.”

“If you have this baby there will no money from us, do you hear me? No money! I am not bank rolling some uneducated asshole from South of the Mason Dixon line, you understand me?”

“I understand you perfectly. We don’t need your money.”

Carol hung up the phone quietly and left it ringing and ringing after wards. All afternoon he rang and rang until she finally unplugged the phone. She wouldn’t answer his calls anymore. Not for a while. She even told Garnet to change the number to unlisted.

“What for?”

“I’ve been getting crank calls, Garnet—heavy breathing, nasty things—let’s change the number.”

Garnet called the phone company and for an extra charge of \$20 they changed the phone. Forty-eight hours after talking to Frank Carol stopped his calls from coming in. She knew he’d probably try to find her but she figured she had some time.

Still the long walks were her undoing. She felt so alone and betrayed by the emptiness of it all. She’d expected something more and it was just about *this*, her pregnancy and Garnet working. Living out in the middle of nowhere and stranded without a car. And those nosy neighbors annoyed her, especially that woman Annette (Joe was okay) but she needed them just the same.

“Garnet. Garnet! Come here!” Annette screamed from the bathroom.

Garnet lifted himself and the baby off the chair and shuffled into the bathroom.

“I don’t dare touch her just in case there was foul play or something. But of course--”

“Foul play? What do you mean foul play?” Garnet interrupted.

“Of course, I know there wasn’t, but this is kind of a crime scene or something.”

“There’s no crime scene. Carol was with the baby and she passed out. You best call an ambulance.”

“She’s dead, Garnet. You know that don’t you? She’s dead.”

“Well...” he thought for a long minute, “I might know that, but this is no crime, Annette. If she’s dead then she just died. Best call the ambulance or a doctor or a burial person or something. A funeral parlor maybe?”

“I’ll call the coroner’s office,” Annette said in her bossy, officious way, the finality of her tone said she didn’t want to really mess with the scene, but she would take charge nonetheless. “Did you undress her or something? Her blouse was open and her bra was down.”

“The baby had to feed. I put Cartesia to her breast. Both of em.”

“You put the baby to a dead woman’s breast? You—you put the baby to suck on a tit and she was dead?”

“I didn’t know if she was dead or not. There’s no telling about that. I just knew the baby was hungry and we don’t have no bottles—Carol wanted to breast feed.”

“Ok. Ok. Ok,” Annette muttered under her breath, thinking: *we got us a lunatic here so I better take charge. Lord. Putting the baby to her breast! Is he stupid, ignorant, sly, scary or what?*

Annette felt it could be all of those things and more but she didn't say, and quite honestly, her mind didn't have the ability to think critically or hold two opposing thoughts at the same time. She usually leapt for the most concrete and logical conclusion; her sense of logic being mostly described as “common sense” with emphasis upon the common aspect of it all. For this reason Annette assumed that Garnet ought to be in custody and under questioning. She knew Bernard at the precinct, he was a good guy; they went to high school together. She'd put a call into him, but first she thought of getting the dead body out of house. Garnet had his hands and arms wrapped around the baby and she wondered if she could pry her loose.

“Let me take the baby, Garnet, let me---“ she reached her arms out but he pulled away.

“No.”

“Don't be stubborn, Garnet—“

“What do you—I know what you're up to.”

Annette reached for the phone on the lamp table, pulling up her pants around ugly hips with their voluminous load of celluloid. She dialed her brother Fry (Ephraim, but nobody called him that) and hoped like hell he'd answer.

“Fry! Fry! It's Annette.”

“I know who it is.”

“We got a situation here. A serious one. At the Miller’s. Garnet and Carol’s?”

“I know who the Millers are. What’s the matter with you—your voice sounds cracked or something. Did you have something to drink?”

“No, I am here—“

Just then Cartesia let out a yell, a scratchy howling call that scared them both—but Garnet rooted around and found her pacifier on the table next to the couch. He plugged it into her tiny little mouth and she sucked so hard he thought she’s suck the thing right up her nose, but it stopped the cry.

“Carol—Carol—it’s Carol—she’s dead!”

“What? What the hell you talking about?”

“I’m serious! She’s over here lying on the bathroom floor, her blouse undone—she’s dead! I need you over here right now.”

“Where’s Garnet?”

“He’s here. He’s right here.”

“Is there –foul play or something?” Fry tried to invent the language he heard on TV—his favorite show was Hawaii Five O.

“Yes, yes there is.”

“Oh now Annette you never liked Garnet but he’s no murderer!”

“Well, you just come and see!”

“I got to leave work.” Fry worked at the Holt town hall, he was a deputy officer and maintenance man combined, Mr. Fix-it General.

“Now. She’s lying on the floor.”

“I’ll get out. Just hang on.”

“He’s coming.” Annette hung up the phone and pronounced this to the air around Garnet’s head.

“Who?”

“My brother.”

“Fry? What for?”

“Garnet—you –aren’t even capable of—“

“I know what I am capable of, Annette. I am capable of asking you to leave my property. You are trespassing.”

“You called me.”

“Yes, that I did. But now I regret--”

“Too bad. I’m here.”

“Yes, you are and—“

Annette held up one of her beefy hands.

“Stop talking.”

She strode around the room giving Garnet a good view of the backside of her, which Garnet loathed, (so much the opposite of Carol’s beautiful soft curves, even after the baby), moving around the furniture, taking in the ugliness of the whole place; the sad simple kitchen with an old red kettle at the stove and shelf full of dishes and cookbooks leaning to one side. Annette strode the place like a sergeant at arms surveying the spoiled remains of a bloody skirmish on the battlefield, looking

for clues of what the enemy did. Only the enemy was her neighbors, a good for nothing loser and a dead woman and wasn't that the crying shame?

"What happened here?"

"What the hell do you mean?"

"I mean—do you have a gun?"

"Course I do. In that drawer by the stove."

She opened the drawer and saw the M9 airsoft gun pistol handgun. She picked it up, holding it in her left hand, then her right, moving herself in an arc to face Garnet and the baby.

"This is pretty nice. New?"

"Got it from my dad when we visited my folks. Hey! Watch it—the damn things loaded!"

"Why?"

"Why? Why not? You never know!"

"You use this thing?"

"I shot a coyote last fall—rooting around in the bushes. Put that down—put it down! I got the baby here!"

"Ok." Annette took the gun with her to the living room and smacked it onto the top of the television. "Just in case."

"Just in case what?"

"Never you mind."

Garnet knew in an instant that Annette would love to kill him if she could, if she could get away with it, and of course she hated him, but although he was constitutionally incapable of hatred, Garnet knew his feelings back at her were dangerously close to it. Something like a wish to watch her disappear and never come back, but this he knew was fatal because somehow his mistrust transmitted itself through her thick and ugly armored body and she jerked her head up at him suddenly.

“What’re you thinking?”

“I am thinking we need to get someone here to look after Carol.”

“All right, I’m calling.” Annette made another call.

“An ambulance?” he asked.

Her head bent into the phone as he spoke and she shook her head.

While she called, Garnet and the baby walked out into the day that began to gray slightly. Sometimes with the dusk coming he could feel a warm wind in the spring and summer, the kind of under current of air that spelled a storm or maybe just rain, but this was a feeling he had several times each year as he got used to the Michigan springs, the sudden dark sky, the low rumble of wind, the trees speaking like they do before a storm; tornado weather. It was a storm brewing.

With the baby held tight in the crook of his left arm, his right arm brushing over the top of her head, he saw her eyes open but she was quiet as the night, looking up at him, expecting nothing. She hadn’t noticed a change in events but Garnet was sure in time she would. He went toward the end of the drive and the mail

box, looking out into the dirt road they hadn't bothered to pave yet and probably never would, this country little road and the stupid town of Holt they ended up living in, he'd never understand. What sacrifices he made for Carol. Why did he do it? Looking into the tiny little heart shaped face of Cartesia he thought maybe neither one of them would stay here long. Garnet stood silent and still at the end of the driveway just as the police car drove up.

Fry Koponen got out of the car. He wasn't a tall man or particularly strong either. He was in okay good shape for his age, fifty-two, but not exactly in great shape—the form and contours of his body had taken on the mushy potato look that comes from too much pizza, donuts and beer.

“Hey! How ya doing Garnet?” Fry reached his long arms out to the baby but Garnet instinctively pulled her close and moved back a step.

“Oh, all right! What's going on here?”

Annette stepped out of the house, clicking and clacking and making the kind of noises a dumb bitch might make when she's sure that she's right about everything under the sun. Garnet thought these thoughts about her and then recoiled at his own malice.

“Carol's dead. Come in the house and look Fry.”

Four

Fry was not the person to enjoy the unpleasant, and looking at the ugly side of life made him sick. It also made him drink. But he was a policeman because he was a football player in high school and not good enough to get into college ball and with a C- average not too bright of a student either. His dad, who had worked at Motor Wheel in Lansing, forever told him he had to find a way to earn a living because he wasn't about to support a grown man. Fry hated the factory work—there was not enough freedom in it for him and there was sure no down time. He decided to do the eighteen-week training at the Mid-Michigan police academy. In those days they didn't require an associates degree, although they do now. Fry's dad knew some people, he pulled a couple of strings and Fry began the classes. The admitting age was 21 but Fry's dad talked them into admitting Fry at nineteen.

“Fry?!” Annette's shout came ripping from the inside of the house. Garnet stood in what appeared to be shock on the front law with the baby in his arms, staring out at nothing.

“I'm coming,” Fry felt his gun and holster at his side. “Garnet—you want to bring the baby inside?” he asked as he passed Garnet heading to the front door.

“I'm fine right here,” Garnet said.

“Okay,” Fry told him and went through the screen door into the living room. He had no itch to see what he knew he had to see and was going to see and it was times like this that he fully realized being a police officer was a total mistake for a man like him.

Carol's body was on the floor of the bathroom, crumpled up, turned over on her side, her left arm twisted in a strange way, the face passive, the eyes closed. She was clearly dead. Fry felt for a pulse. Put his ear to see if he could hear some breathing.

"You know she could be revived, for God's sake. Didn't anybody call an ambulance?"

"She's dead," Annette said, finality to her voice, but then everything she said had a declarative tone.

"There's no foul play here, what're you talking about, Annette?"

He gently moved the head from side to side.

"No sign of a blow or anything like that."

"Ok."

"Call an ambulance. Hurry up. Should've been done already."

Fry got up with some difficulty in the tiny bathroom, moved Annette aside from the doorway and eased out into the house. The place was a sty, no doubt about it--old crappy used furniture. *Don't these kids have any pride? I thought Carol came from money.*

Garnet and Cartesia came back into the house.

"I've called an ambulance Garnet. And you'd best get to the hospital and then call her parents. You know their number, don't you?"

"She has it in her little notebook."

Garnet had never even spoken to Frank and Bootsie since Carol stopped speaking to them. Still, she had their number somewhere and her little sister Mindy called every so often from Boston U. where she was a junior majoring in something or other.

Garnet rooted around in the little end table in corner where Carol kept her personal stuff. He never bothered with it. In the small drawer he found pens, a hammer, tape measure, 3 X 5 notecards in yellow, scotch tape, a tiny picture of her and her sister ages 10 and 12 (Garnet quickly put that picture into his pants pocket) and a little red address book. He pocketed the book as well.