

Root River Crime Scene

The names in this account have been changed to protect whoever it is that needs protecting.

The scene is that beautiful bend in the Root River just west of Houston where the water rushes through shallow rapids and the north bank runs away into lovely woods and meadows. It's a place for hikers and bikers, birders and lovers, a place of peace. But not today.

Verl and Arlene Torgerson are just about to stumble onto an awful scene. It's a scene made that much more gruesome by the beauty of the setting. Their walk is about to be slapped still, punched in the gut. The blows are delivered by fate, in the form of a lifeless body in the water.

Arlene says that Verl saw it first. Verl hasn't been able to say much at all since the incident. But they do agree that it was face down in the river under the south side of the bridge. Stripped bare but still recognizable, there she was, Ralph Haggerdahl's '67 Dodge Dart, dead in the water. Arlene took a deep breath and checked for signs of life. She turned the key, held a mirror under the tail pipe, tried to coax a tune from the radio with the gentle touch of her Medical Technician's hand. She already knew the answer but she checked anyway. Professionals are like that. Her shoulders slumped a little then she turned and walked back up the riverbank where Verl was losing his breakfast. "She's gone. Done for. Cold. It happened last night probably between 11:30 and 1:00. You can see by the marks along here that she was dragged the last hundred feet, already dead."

Verl, in spite of his nausea, couldn't help but feel proud of Arlene. "She's one smart Technician", he thought. Then he hurled again. He'd never been any good at these grisly kinds of situations. The incident involving their pet hamster and the microwave comes to mind. But that's another story. Let's just say that Verl gets a little wobbly when road meets kill.

Arlene continued, "I'd say from the look of her she was driven here by two women in their fifties, one short and the other shorter. There are blocks glued to the pedals and an empty pack of Virginia Slims on the seat. When the little Dodge finally gave out on them they dumped her here. Strong little gals to have dragged her so far. My guess is they're circus midgets."

Verl looked up from between his knees and marveled. "Arlene, if you don't beat all!" Then he doubled over and lost his cookies again.

Arlene went on, "Circus folks are cold and they don't have much mechanical aptitude. The short ones are usually the worst. That's why there's nothing missing from the body, nothing stripped, except for Ralph's signature faux leopard seat cushion and steering wheel cover. That kind of stuff catches their eye. I'd bet you dollars to doughnuts that those little monsters are in Rochester right now with the new Ringling show. Are you all right, hun? Verl? Verl, say something!"

The poor guy had passed out when Arlene began to talk about the circus. You see, his folks were circus people too. His dad ran the cotton candy machine and his mom worked with the big cats. It still haunted him. The only childhood that Verl had ever known was cotton candy, tiger dung and the open road.

He had kept his boyhood a secret from Arlene all these years. He worried himself sick through every one of their four pregnancies. He was enormously relieved when each of the children was born of average size and without tattoos. That's why he insisted on naming them solid, respectable names like Bob, Mary, Bill and Kate instead of Gonzo, Blaze, Top Hat and Minnie .

"Oh, sorry hun. I think I fainted." Verl croaked, a little embarrassed. "You sure did, hun. You had me a little worried there. Now let's get your shoes cleaned off and go report this. We should call Ralph too. I'm sure he's beside himself, that machine was all he had."

The ride to Caledonia was easy except for the recurring images in both their minds of that poor thing in the river. Neither one of them could remember something this awful happening in all their years in the valley. One day follows another here. There's continuity. Now this. This is not the kind of thing you just shrug off. No, this will be with them for a while.

Arlene returned her attention to her husband who was just beginning to get his color back. "You're looking better." She said. "It's a shame, about your breakfast, all that good food, gone to waste. I forgot you had the lingonberries on your waffle. Maybe we should get a movie. Take our minds off the Dart."

"You're the best, hun." Verl said. "Great idea. Should we bring home a pizza too? I'm feeling better already."

