

## The Soldier

by James B. Goode

For several years now, Violet Jane Gibbs has kept up with reading crime magazines such as *True Detective*, *Police Dragnet*, *The Lowdown*, and *Inside Detective*. She thinks all you have to do is keep your ear to the rail and you will be able to protect yourself by learning to recognize the Charles Starkweathers and Caril Ann Fugates of the world. She says these types strike a certain psychological profile and you can learn a lot by studying how they went about shooting her stepfather and mother, strangling her two-and-a-half-year-old sister Betty Jean, shooting August Meyer, executing Robert Jensen and Carol King, two innocent teenagers, stabbing Clara Ward and her maid Lillian Fencel, gunning down Lauer Ward, and blasting away that traveling salesman Merle Collison. She thinks you just can't trust anybody, no matter how normal they look.

Whenever Violet Jane takes her girls, Tonya, Beth, Katherine, and Gail anywhere in the car, she warns them of all the dangers inherent in just being outside the house—particularly in an automobile. It is almost as if she has brainstormed a list of everything that can go wrong and prints it on her mind with a permanent marker. This list is repeated on every trip they take anywhere, even if it is just to the hardware store.

Violet's baby sister Callie Lorene has invited them down for a weekend visit to Murfreesboro, Tennessee where she and her husband Alfred Earl run a Chevron service station. Callie is Violet Jane's baby sister who married right out of high school and moved directly there where she has lived in the same house right next to Petercheff's Chevron for 25 years now. Callie is jealous of Violet Jane because she and Alfred Earl have never been able to have any children. She says that Violet is a fertile myrtle. She can just look at Roy Lloyd's wangdancer and get pregnant. Callie likes children better than anything in the world, but Alfred Earl thinks children ought to go back to wherever the hell they came from. He particularly doesn't like girls. They are just too much fluff and smell-good to suit him, he thinks. He prefers the dark recesses of the bays in the Chevron Station and the smell of fresh grease, old oil, and unleaded gasoline.

"Now, if we run out of gas you all know what to do. Lie down in the floorboard and cover up with that quilt I've put back there in the seat," Violet Jane says as they speed down Route 96 out of Franklin. Tonya eyes the Drunkard's Path quilt Violet Jane has carried in the car for as far back as she can remember. She often conducts regular, unannounced drills where she slams on the brakes and yells, "We're out of gas girls!"

During the drills, they have learned to fall like sacks of grain onto the floorboard, Tonya pulling the quilt over top and tucking it in around them. There can be no sound from beneath the quilt or Violet Jane says, "Do you want to let the molesters know where you are? The longer we can delay the better chance we'll have. Now, shut your yappin' lips." They don't ever seem to perfect the drill enough to suit Violet Jane.

"Don't you EVER even think about pickin' up nobody," she says. "Don't even let that thought enter your head, 'cause it's worse than the most deepest carnal, sinful, devil-ridden thought that you could ever think!" She adds.

"We need to pee," Beth says from the back seat. "We need to pee real bad."

"We ain't been on the road but twenty minutes," Violet Jane says. "I told you girls to get all that done before we left Franklin. I'm not stoppin' ever mile or two for every hare-brained thing you might want to do." She jerks the steering wheel sharply to the right and pulls into a small grocery parking lot. The girls pile out of the car as she holds open the car door. They smooth their skirts with the palms of their hands and pull up their socks.

"I ain't got time for you all to primp," Violet Jane says. "Let's get our business done and get back on the road. Callie Lorene is expecting us early this evenin' and I aim to not disappoint her. You know how Alfred Earl is anyway. He ain't going to like us being there regardless, but he will really have his shorts in a wad if we're late for supper. You know he likes to eat right on time."

They go into the double doors of the grocery, down by the drinking fountain, and into the women's restroom. Violet Jane helps each make a nest of toilet paper on the seat and then waits just outside the gang of stall doors until they all get finished. She marches them over to the sinks and scrubs each of their hands thoroughly and dries them carefully with paper towels. On the way out of the grocery, Katherine begs for a Pepsi Cola. Violet Jane has a rule about them having too many soft drinks. It is just plain bad for their teeth and complexions, she thinks. She makes them take drinks from the porcelain water fountain and then herds them all back into rear seat of the car. She turns back onto Route 96 and starts to put pavement behind her.

After a few minutes, they are approaching Benhill just outside the Stones River National Battlefield when they pass a young soldier sitting on his duffle bag with his thumb extended from his right fist. Gail can see his face as they pass. His mouth falls into a deep frown as he realizes they are not going to stop.

"Momma, did you see that soldier boy?" Beth asks.

"Yeah, I seen him. Do you think I'm blind?" She says. The car begins to slow down.

"Do you think he needs a ride somewheres?" Tonya asks.

"Well, he ain't got his thumb stuck out just for his health," Violet Jane says. "People who stick their thumb out while they're sittin' on the side of the road generally want to go somewhere farther than where they are."

All four girls are thinking they should pick the soldier boy up and take him where he wants to go. None of them say anything because they already know what their mamma will say. They have their necks craned and peer out the rear window back at the soldier.

The car slows to a crawl. The girls ready themselves for Violet Jane to yell, "We're out of gas!" But she doesn't; she whips the car around into a wide place at the side of the road and turns back toward the soldier.

"Now, I'm goin' back to pick up that there soldier boy. He's servin' our country, a makin' sure we all can be free. He's got a mamma somewheres and she is wonderin'

where he is. He's probably headed home to some home cookin'. Now don't any of you EVER do this. This is a bad thing, so don't ever do this. If you ever even think of doin' this, I'll know. You realize that mothers know everything—even your thoughts, so it ain't no use to even think about it. The only reason I'm doing this is because he's a soldier boy in service to his country—the greatest country in the world because it is free. They're the reason we can live so well here in America. It's because of what them soldier boys done during World War II. Now let me tell you. When I get down here and put him in the front seat with me, I don't want you to take any of those eight eyeballs off him. If he makes any kind of suspicious move, you let me know with hand signals. I'll be lookin' through the rearview mirror. If you see anything that looks like a gun or knife, you let me know and if I see anything I'll give you a signal," she says as she passes the soldier again, goes down to the next wide spot, and makes a 180-degree turn.

The girls don't know anything but the basics of hand signaling. Violet Jane makes hand signals all the time and mostly they don't have any earthly idea what she means. They know if she turns her palm downward and makes rapid pumping movements, she means for them to lower their voices or if she holds the palm of her right hand straight out toward them, they know to stop whatever they are doing or saying. But, otherwise, they don't know what all the other flailing means. They don't really know what their momma will do if the soldier turns out to be a molester in disguise.

Violet Jane pulls to the side of the road and opens the driver's door. "Howdy soldier boy! Where you goin' to?" She asks.

The soldier gets to his feet, with his duffle bag strap dangling in his left hand and a non-filtered cigarette held between his forefinger and thumb of his right hand. He has a brooding look on his unshaven face.

"I'm headed over to Almadale to see my Momma. I missed my train connection in Nashville yesterday and decided to thumb my way home," he says.

She is relieved to hear that he is only going to Almadale because it is only about five miles down Route 96. But, he missed his train? There is no passenger train service out of Nashville to this part of Tennessee anymore. He must have meant to say he missed his bus, she concludes. She gets out of the car to open the trunk.

"Well, put your duffle bag in the trunk and ditch that cigarette. I don't allow no smokin' in my car," Violet Jane says as she turns the key in the trunk lock and lifts the lid. The soldier grinds the cigarette butt on the heel of his boot, scatters the grains of tobacco to the wind, and hefts the over-stuffed bag into the cavity.

"You get up in the front with me," she says. He opens the passenger's door and collapses into the plush, leather seat.

"These are my girls, Tonya, Beth, Katherine, and Gail. Tonya is the oldest, then Beth, Katherine, and Gail is the baby." Gail hates for her mother to call her "the baby" because she has already turned five and will be going to school next year.

"I trust you because you're in an Army uniform," Violet Jane says as she pulls back onto the highway, giving him a lingering eagle-eye look. "The only reason I picked you up is because you're in service to the United States of America and are protectin' us. But if you make one false move, I'll cut your ears off," she says.

The soldier gives her a portentous look. He raises his left eyebrow and sits up straighter in the seat.

Violet Jane drapes her arm over the seat and lets it dangle down the back, swinging like a pendulum. She already has misgivings about picking up this soldier. He has a musty smell that fills the interior of the car. He removes his wool hat and places it on his lap.

"Where all have you served in the Army?" Violet Jane asks.

"Well, mostly I was in the Pacific fighting the Japs," he says. "I was all over them islands. We was in the landing on Guam, then landed on Leyte in the Philippines on Thanksgiving day, then Kerama Retto . . . I was within a few feet of Ernie Pyle when he was killed at Ie Shima. Then we moved on to help in the liberation of Tokyo." He pauses, removes a comb from his shirt pocket, and runs it through his wavy hair. "I sure am tickled that the war is over and I just can't wait to see my momma. If Truman hadn't dropped the bombs, I guess I'd been killed dead!"

Violet Jane glances over to see the campaign metals dangling from his pocket. She glimpses his name tag from the corner of her eye. "Charles S . . ." She can't see the rest of his last name because it is obscured by a deep fold in his shirt. A long, crawling shiver runs up her spine and a cold sweat breaks out across her forehead. She begins to gesture furiously with the dangling right hand. The girls look at one another. The signals don't mean anything to them. They can see no gun or knife. Violet brings her right hand back across the seat, moves her eyes, but not her head, and sees him staring off toward the dense forest sliding by the passenger's side window.

He's planning his next move, she thinks. It's just a matter of moments and he'll be on them like a chicken on a June Bug. He'll rape and kill them all, leaving them somewhere out in the woods along some dirt road. That's where they always leave their victims. It's in some shallow grave, usually covered with leaves. Violet slowly reaches down to palm the Case hunting knife she keeps under the driver's side of the bench seat. Then, out of the blue, the soldier quickly leans over, as if he's searching for something on the floorboard. The short hairs on Violet's neck stand up like static electricity has grabbed them. Her heart moves the front of her dress out and back. This is it. This is the moment for which she has trained. Her grip on the knife tightens. She jerks the steering wheel hard to the right toward a wide place on the side of the road next to a pine forest. The car shakes violently, its locked wheels skating across the loose gravel like she had once done when she stepped on marbles the girls left in the floor. The soldier is thrown violently forward and then back as the car slams into a ditch. At the exact moment of his recoil, Violet brings the knife upward and to the right, and meets his left shoulder, slamming the chrome blade down into it with all the strength she can muster. She can feel the sickening parting of muscle as she twists the knife to make it plunge deeper. The soldier lets out a scream—an excruciating blend of pain and surprise. He looks toward her as he grabs the wound. Violet retrieves the knife and before he can say anything, she plunges the knife into one of his vitreous, frightened eyes. This blow pierces his brain, blood spurting from his mouth and splattering the dashboard and windshield. He slumps forward, his head banging into the glove compartment. Sometimes you believe they're dead, but they really aren't, she thinks. She looks for his weapon—to take it away—to make sure he doesn't come back, like she's seen in some of the horror movies. She sees it in his left hand that is now sprawled across the engine hump between them. It is his comb. My God! She thinks. Oh sweet Jesus, it's his comb. He dropped his comb. He bent over to get his comb, she realizes. All of this is a dream, running in slow motion. There has been no sound. But now she hears the girls' frantic screaming. They scream and scream and scream, a four part chorus of hysteria.