

I used to go down there and watch television with her every night. She told me I was her favorite girl in the whole world. She never got mad at me. If I came home with a C on my report card and Mom yelled at me, Nana would tell me I was really smart and could do anything I set my mind to. Since Nana died, I don't care about school. The work keeps getting harder, and like, I feel dumber and dumber. So I just don't do my homework. I'm failing math this year. I'll die if I have to go to summer school. I hate school. I told my parents I'm dropping out the minute I turn sixteen. They said people in our family don't drop out of high school; they go to college. I don't really feel like I'm part of the family. Sometimes I wish I had Down's syndrome. Then no one

would expect anything from me."

She lets out a sob and quickly catches herself. "I don't cry," she says.

"It sounds to me like life has been pretty hard and sad since your grandmother died." She takes the Kleenex I offer. When she stops crying, she stares out the window. I notice her foot and tongue stud are silent. She says she has a journal at home that she writes in sometimes, and she'll bring it when we meet next week because there are some things she's written about her Nana. She flashes a tentative smile.

"Seeing a shrink isn't as bad as I thought it would be," she says. Then she gets up and clatters out on heels that barely let her stand on her own two feet.

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VERRÜCKT PLAY

By Cindy Konig-Matthews

The woman was positive no one would suspect her. She wore a dark dress, a same-coloured apron pinned under the collar bone. Her blond hair was styled in the required fashion with a prayer cap covering a no-nonsense bun. Her practical shoes were silent as she wandered the Dollar Store rows stashing trinkets in the vast pockets. The bulge they created blended with her oversized belly.

She made it out undetected. She needed a washroom. Once in a stall, she sat on the toilet and spread the haul on her lap. The Halloween items looked chintzy in the artificial light. She tossed the rejects where the dirty sanitary pads go.

"These are the keepers." She fondled a metal toy soldier, a flashy hair pin, and a ten-pack of drink umbrellas.

She buried the booty in her dress pocket then vigorously scrubbed her hands, delighting in the soap's almond smell. She checked her Timex. Not bad. Only ten minutes later than arranged. In the food court she spotted her husband, Ivan, perched like a hawk scouting its prey.

"You didn't buy anything, I see," Ivan said, holding up his three bags, Walmart's logo plain as day.

"Nothing caught my eye," she smiled, fondling the prizes. She gestured at the A&W sign. "I'm craving a Mama-Burger Combo."

Ivan leaned in to rub her hard belly. "My lovely

Mrs. B, so full of child, it would please me greatly!"

Wife twisted away from his seeking hands. "People might see us."

* * *

Ivan didn't really notice at first. The sparkly hair pin. Pink undergarments replacing her usual off-white ones. Scrubbing floors and crown moulding until her fingers bled. Ignoring raisins and cranberries, dust and grit scattered on the kitchen floor.

Then she was different with baby Suzanna. When Suzanna asked for a story, frantic laughter replaced story-telling. Wife had shredded page after page. When Ivan sought an explanation, she responded with a question, "Can't you see I had no choice?"

The tickle parties took the cake. A mild, pleasant tickle exploded into merciless torture. Protesting knees did nothing to resist stabbing fingers, Suzanna's dress wet with fear.

At the end of August, Ivan employed Emma as a hired girl, someone to help out. Emma noticed the peculiarities in the home within days. Because Emma liked the family, she kept her observations to herself. Besides, she was timid by nature, not one to stir up trouble. Instead she kept notes in a red Moleskine notebook, a gift from her grade-eight teacher. Emma recorded, and then stuffed the note-

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book under her mattress in a bedroom shared with two siblings.

September 3

Arrived 8:10 a.m., furniture covered with bed sheets. Little Suzanna left on own on floor in kitchen. Mrs. B nowhere in sight. Later, asked Mrs. B. why furniture hidden, she laughed like a witch on a broom.

September 6

Mrs. B scraped everything out of fridge into slop pot for pigs. Why? Scolded me. I had not noticed the food was spoiled.

September 7

Mrs. B neglected to rinse suds off dinner dishes. Everything sticky, dirty. Mr. B said wife awake until 3 a.m. Whined rest of the day.

September 10

Last night Mrs. B cut pictures from yard sale magazines. Hundreds of photos scattered over kitchen counter, floor, and table. Used flour-water mixture to glue pictures to walls and cupboards.

Before the hired hands arrived to work in the shop, Ivan removed with a paint scraper evidence of Wife's latest nightly obsession. He was worried about her. He offered her tonics. He shared books on meditation. He tried being laid-back. Ivan plucked a long strand of hair from their marriage bed to take for metal poisoning analysis. Caressed the bulge of money in his pocket and chickened out at the last minute. It was like casting for explanations in the Dead Sea.

He offered back rubs and foot massages. Nothing. Like a mad calf at auction, he tried corporal punishment. She threatened him with worse. And he believed her.

Ivan called on the Bishop to plead for understanding.

The Bishop agreed things were strangely amiss and instructed him to go home and procreate. The woman was sorely underused for life's purpose, to give him sons.

The hired girl's pencil turned red hot as she attempted to keep up her note keeping.

September 15, 2009

Mr. B says Wife at hospital to pick up baby. I know all about pregnancy but don't let on to Mr. B.

September 21

Asked baby's name. No answer from Mr. B. Mrs. B still at hospital. Mr. B has shadows under his eyes.

September 29

Mr. B tells me Wife not doing well but coming home anyway. No mention of baby.

At the hospital they told them the baby had died weeks before and Wife would have to deliver the still-birth. Ivan twisted his suspenders as he listened to Wife howl.

After her recovery, the manic wife Ivan knew of late evaporated. Ivan watched his wife drag herself up the porch steps and squeeze herself into their matrimonial bedroom. She refused to use the toilet. Later, when Ivan asked Emma to help him dump the contents of the bedpan, she gave him attitude and quit on the spot.

"Forgive me but I never signed up to be a nursemaid for adults, Mr. B. I just don't know how to help her. I'm scared to be here. I'm scared for you and baby Suzanna, too."

Ivan recorded observations on a calendar he squirreled away in a drawer where he completed his harness business books. The harness business was booming and Ivan found it a struggle to keep up and run the household. He needed Wife to pull her weight.

Ivan called on his mother-in-law.

"She needs your help, Ivan, and if you don't do something to help my daughter, God be my witness, I will strike you down," threatened the wife's mother. Ivan secretly hoped his mother-in-law might take Wife home.

Ivan slept on the living room sofa, an uncomfortable choice but better than the floor. He performed a nightly check on Wife and this night he knew something wasn't right as soon as he walked into the hallway en route to their bedroom. Wife's head slumped off the edge of the bed like she'd been kicked by a horse. The pile of vomit under the bed punched Ivan into action. He keyed 9-1-1 into his business cell phone.

November 24

Neighbour Andrew Kaufman drove Ivan and Suzanna in his pick-up truck to Freedom Long-Term Mental Health Facility. Once inside, Suzanna's heels clicked on the shiny floor of the red brick building. In her right hand, she clutched a plastic bag jammed with treasures. In her left she swung a made-in-

China doll, its feet chewed off to the ankles.

Sundays were a day of worship in their culture. The Bishop reluctantly excused Ivan's attendance at the meeting house due to the circumstances.

At Freedom, until patients were fit enough to see them, children killed time on a long wooden bench situated in the dim foyer. Suzanna pumped her legs. When that grew tiresome, she played staring games with massive paintings of an angel, a queen, and a saint. Try as she might, Suzanna never won.

Suzanna's plastic bag came from a garage sale the previous summer, before Mother's disease gobbled her mind. She plucked contents from the bag: a magnetic checkerboard, 99.9% pure soap, some good-on-one-side-only paper, a finger-knitting kit, and a single envelope. A ratty box of crayons and a piece of summer sausage wrapped in wax paper stayed put.

"Anything in the bag for me to take in there?" Ivan gestured behind him where a large black man, his uniform immaculate, guarded two blue doors. Ivan finger-combed stray hairs that broke free from her blond braids.

Suzanna shoulder shrugged and dropped an envelope into his awaiting hand.

"May I?" he asked before deciding on his own to remove the contents.

The paper had been folded and refolded many times. Three stick people. One, a small girl, in black crayon. Three blue slashes where a face should have been. Another person, taller, also in black, its bun created without benefit of light or mirror. The eyes like a snuffed-out candle, dark and smudged. To the left a man, large, dark rimmed glasses. His mouth a crescent moon.

"Shall I take this with me?" asked Ivan.

Her eyes flicked consent.

She dumped the remaining contents. Two crayons, one blue, one black, spilled through the rungs onto the floor shouting *ping, ping*. The summer sausage a runaway wagon wheel.

Suzanna stuffed the sausage in Ivan's face. "Want some?"

"Where are the rest?" He pointed at the lonely crayons concealed by the bench.

"Mommy ate them."

What Ivan craved was a normal conversation with a friend. But friends and family strangely retreated when the going got tough. So Ivan returned to the Bishop. "Am I the only one, you know, with a wife like this?"

"No one else in the congregation knows the

troubles you are facing like you do. Pray with all your might to the heavenly Father. He'll show you the way, Ivan."

Two months later...

Mrs. B licked sugar from the heel of her hand. She rocked on the plastic orange dining chair. Others from the unit—Don, Cherise, Susan, and Debbie—played cribbage at a table to her left. An unlit cigarette perched on Don's lower lip, his right hand swiping at imaginary ashes. Debbie slurped her coffee, the annoying sound bouncing off the serving curtain that separated the diners from the cook.

Visits on Sundays were a crap-shoot. Uniformed staff took bets on which patients would be abandoned.

Everyone gave Dave space. On the outside, Don had raised pigeons. His street name was Wingy Don. He raised the birds in the attic of his home. Hundreds of pigeons perched on his shoulder to coo, poop, coo, and poop. Fun at first but when he tired of it, he popped them arsenic pellets. Less mess than a gun.

Mrs. B sipped her coffee. Bitter. Her mouth and tongue drier than pocket lint. She dumped another sugar cube into the cup using a finger to stir. Would he come?

Before Freedom, Mrs. B had slept days on end in the matrimonial bed ignoring Ivan's advances and attempts at support. During therapy, Dr. Bradshaw explained that Ivan was responsible for saving her life and now it was up to Mrs. B to grow up and face her illness.

The pills the nurses doled out ate her memory. When she politely complained during group, Dr. Bradshaw's assistant reminded her to seek patience. Eventually most negative symptoms would fade. Simple decisions like whether to choose white or whole wheat buns at dinner were monumental. Dr. Bradshaw likened her symptoms to a haze on a July day, eventually fading to reveal clear blue. Mrs. B found the analogy bewildering but trusted Dr. Bradshaw so much she doubted she'd ever feel calm enough to leave Freedom.

She checked the clock. Three more minutes. Mrs. B wanted the visit to be perfect. The chair she'd saved Ivan looked crooked again. She scolded herself when she checked the chair three more times. Its feet scraped the floor, the sound like a bored dog nicking a screen door.

Debbie yelled, "Shut up, Mrs. B. We're playing cards over here."

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With concerted effort, Mrs. B raised her eyes when she heard the distinctive, soft steps of Ivan's shoes. Others here dragged their feet when they walked. Not Ivan.

He yanked the cheap plastic chair across from his wife. She offered him her cup.

"I'm getting better. See, I made you coffee."

"You've got nice colour in your face," Ivan ventured. He set the picture Suzanna had drawn on the pile of sugar Mrs. B had scraped off leftover cubes.

"Who made this?" she asked.

"Suzanna, who else?"

"Suzanna? I know you told me once but I'm having trouble remembering." Ivan's face was as blank as a chalkboard on the first day of school.

No clues there.

Oh, no, she thought. I'm supposed to remember. Sweat beads pooled under the blue sack that was the Floor A uniform. Ivan disagreed with Freedom's uniform policy.

Ivan watched Wife rock. White spittle gathered in the corners of her lips. It took her every effort to unhinge her tongue from the roof of her mouth. Her blue eyes dull, the pupils a speck of dust in a flat, off-white snow bank. Mrs. B squeezed them shut to rid herself of headless chickens running in the yard.

Before he left, Ivan wished he'd told Wife there was nobody he loved more.

February, 2011

"Ivan, how are you getting on without me?"

Full of herself today. Dr. Bradshaw was still trying to stabilize her medication dosage. Electro-shock therapy might be the culprit. He told Ivan there'd be days like this.

"We manage."

Mrs. B struggled with the word *we*.

"Suzanna told me once you ate her crayons."

Suzanna, that's a nice name, she thought. "Why would anyone do that?"

"Not anyone. You, her mother."

Mrs. B wondered whose mother she was.

"Why did you eat her crayons?" Ivan persisted.

"I am not fond of the colour red."

After seven and a half months at Freedom, her hard work earned her privileges. Through her treatment plan, she secured a volunteer position at Freedom's canteen. Every Tuesday and Thursday she sold cartons of milk, chips, bananas, as well as the ever popular ice cream bars. Staff monitored her behaviour with visitors and eventually Dr. Bradshaw said she'd earned herself scheduled day trips home. Volunteer drivers took the pressure off Ivan.

When Mrs. B was finally released to Ivan's custody, the treatment plan was nearly complete. A new hired girl. Regular opportunities for socialization. Supervised medication administration. Weekly counselling.

Dr. Bradshaw hounded Ivan to arrange counselling for himself and even little Suzanna. When Ivan mentioned this to the Bishop, he suggested leaving the treatment plan for the one it was intended, Mrs. B.

Ivan still longed for someone to confide in. One reason he got married was to share his innermost thoughts and feelings with a wife. Now, he spent a lot of time in the shop with the hired hands and in the barn with the pigs. Sometimes he chatted with the barn cats, but frankly this change in his behaviour caused his heart to flutter.

Mrs. B showed Ivan glimpses of her former self, but he never again tried procreation. **R**

