Winesburg, Indiana: Triple Crown

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Abstract
She says it's like pulling teeth to get your kids to talk with you. Well, I've never believed that, not even before I got the new job. Maybe I'm lucky, but Jerrod and Jenny have always talked. Sometimes too much, yet I can't complain since they inherited blabbing from their mother. Life is good at home, not ideal, but pretty good. We converse over dinner every night. We watch a little TV after their homework. On weekends we take little trips.

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She says it’s like pulling teeth to get your kids to talk with you. Well, I’ve never believed that, not even before I got the new job. Maybe I’m lucky, but Jerrod and Jenny have always talked. Sometimes too much, yet I can’t complain since they inherited blabbing from their mother. Life is good at home, not ideal, but pretty good. We converse over dinner every night. We watch a little TV after their homework. On weekends we take little trips.

Now the neighbor’s kids, they’re another story. Little sneaks. Hardened criminals waiting to happen, if you ask me. Really, what can you expect with a mother who covers up for them, who doesn’t have the slightest respect for personal property? This isn’t my kind of community, I’ll tell you straight off,—only a temporary landing pad between divorce and moving into a decent place with Ronny. A neighborhood of tacky rental houses—I knew it wasn’t a good sign, but I have to pay off student loans, so I keep reminding the kids this is an “interim solution.” A person can tolerate almost anything for a short time. Almost anything.

When we find the smashed-to-smithereens window in Ronny’s truck, we know it has to be that older brat next door. Sheila showed my Jenny and Jerrod the slingshot her uncle gave her. “Uncle,” that kind of sly nicknaming can confuse kids, since he sleeps in the same bed as their mom. Do they think Sheila’s never heard of sex? Why don’t they say “boyfriend?” Ronny and me, we’re right out in the open, explaining to the kids that once legal matters get sorted,
we'll make them ring bearers at the wedding. Well, you see what I mean about blabbing.

It wouldn’t be so bad if it wasn’t his new truck—something Ronny’s been eyeing for a year, just stenciled with the logo of his construction company emerald green on both doors of the cab. He was so proud of Eleanora—he likes to name things, an odd habit, but harmless. His favorite hammer is Arnold. Ronny has a cute sense of humor to go with his cute body and complement his dark good looks. My kids love him. Even my mother loves him. Anyway, the window was one of those tinted black wing things that’s going to cost half-a-month’s rent in this dumpy house.


But the adrenaline is pumping kathump, kathump and I march right over there and ask if she’s going to take responsibility for her daughter’s carelessness. (I never think the kid did it on purpose. She doesn’t seem coordinated enough to hit a target.) I ask straight out, “Are you going to replace the window?”

So guess what she says.

“How do we know it was Sheila’s fault?” The smile is a little sly, but her teeth are perfect, even white teeth, the nicest thing about her.

“Well, how about: she’s the only one around here toting a slingshot.”

“Who says the window was broken by a slingshot? And if it was, who’s to say other kinds don’t have this ordinary toy?”

Ordinary toy? How about “lethal weapon?” Of course I don’t waste time arguing with Mrs. Perry Mason. We can’t get a forensic report for a rock. So I say to her, “Let me give you some advice. You take that slingshot back and watch your Sheila and Brian because Ronny is a big man with a temper and you don’t want him coming here next time.”

Which is an outrageous lie because Ronny is a puppy; what would you suppose of a man who calls his hammer Arnold? But she doesn’t know this.

I should have expected her reply.

“Kids these days, it’s like pulling teeth to get them to talk with you.”

In one sentence she insults my intelligence and my profession. If I were a nicer person, I’d try to get to know the woman. She’s obviously down on her luck. But I’m overwhelmed trying to understand people and this particular neighbor
I’ve always been lucky with Jenny and Jerrod, always assured them they could tell me anything. And I’ve been honest—when I was fed up with cutting hair and wanted a more challenging job, I told them the dental tech training would squeeze our family budget. You know what Jenny said? She declared, “You have to follow your dreams, Mom.” Imagine. She was eight at the time; that was four rocky, exciting, hectic years ago.

I am a lot happier now. And a better mother for it. My favorite part is making these temporary crowns. You have to get the mold just right, trust me. You mix so much liquid with the composite, fill the shell, pat it down evenly. Let it solidify. Then gently, very gently, release it. Combination chef and sculptor, that’s how I see the work. Art, in its own small way. Of course some days here, the job is just cavity after cavity, filling after filling, where Dr. Carl does all the creative stuff and I spray and suck with tubes. Those days I feel more like a plumber.

Hey, I got sidetracked: the good news is that Ronny’s insurance paid for most of the window and the delinquents, Sheila and Brian, have been lying low for a while.

Naturally, family life isn’t quiet for long. No, nothing to do with my drunken Ex. He was relieved to be erased from the family photo—will probably erase himself altogether with the vodka. And although he never paid a cent of child support, he doesn’t bother the kids or me. Truthfully, I do wonder how they feel about losing their dad, but Ronny is a much better father than Norman ever was—taking them to movies, for country rides in Eleanora. They love sitting high in the cab. And I do worry about leaving them alone on school holidays when I have to work. Even though they’re super responsible and I was out babysitting at Jenny’s age.

Listen to this story. I’m here last Wednesday. 7-4 as usual, and it’s some kind of teacher’s holiday or convention, so the kids are off school. I’ve planned ahead. Ronny says he’ll swing by for lunch, teasing that Jenny’s a better cook than I am. I’ve rented two videos for the kids, which they’ve promised not to watch until they finish homework. Cross-your-heart isn’t necessary because Jenny is President of the Math Club (doesn’t get it from me; can’t imagine she gets it from Norman) and Jerrod is the best writer in his class. I’m not saying my kids are junior Albert Einsteins, but they like school, you know. Well, I call them at 11 a.m., between a simple filling and an impacted wisdom tooth (not my favorite assignment). Sure enough, all’s quiet on the home front. Doing fine, Mom. Don’t worry. Yes, we’ll call if there’s a problem.

It’s a big day at the office. At 1p.m., a woman comes in for a triple crown, the
three front teeth on the top row. She’s a young person, too, 28, maybe 29. You never know about teeth and age. Some eighty year olds could do Colgate commercials. And some gals like this twenty-something—because of childhood poverty or stupid parents or bad calcium genes—just have rotten teeth. Obviously we don’t use words like “rotten.” We say “seriously compromised” or “diseased,” or...In any event, I need to get this right, even if it is a temporary. You don’t want her going out in the world looking like Bela Lugosi. Marie, that’s her name, a smart girl, a nurse, tries not to be anxious. Dr. Carl removes the broken fillings, drills away crumbly bits of enamel. I’d never tell her how sad those teeth look waiting for the crowns. Little orphans, and of course they’re super sensitive; we’re so close to the nerves.

Marie’s not afraid of the drill or hoses or even the pain, maybe because she’s also a health professional. But I can tell she’s nervous about her appearance. Well, *isn’t everybody?* We had one 50 year old salesman make us re-fit a back bottom molar four times because he didn’t like the porcelain match. Nobody’s going to see that faraway tooth besides his lover or his doctor. But we cheerfully obliged.

I can hardly believe my ears when Dr. Carl declares, “Don’t worry, Rhonda here is an artist when it comes to temporary crowns. You’ll walk out today looking like a million dollars.” He’s not a man of words, Dr. Carl, and I have to tell you that praise makes me pretty happy. Still, I maintain a steady hand and concentrate slowly on the task. In the end, well, I don’t think it’s right to say we improve on Mother Nature, but Marie does have a lovely smile when she looks in the hand mirror.

Just as Marie’s leaving, Marge comes up and says I should call home. My breath catches. Of course Marge was right not to interrupt during that delicate procedure, especially when Jenny tells her no, it’s not an emergency.

I don’t make a proper farewell to Marie, but we’ll see her in two weeks when the permanent crown arrives. I’m rushing over to the phone. No emergency, I remind myself. Of course the line is busy the first time I dial. And the second. I stare at the picture of Lake Superior on Marge’s wall calendar. Finally I get through. Jerrod answers. Doesn’t have a clue why Jenny has phoned and takes an *age* to find her in that tiny house.

The kids have *never* called me at work before and my head is spinning. Maybe some Children’s Welfare snoop has come by and found them home alone. I wouldn’t put it past Sheila’s mother, the stay-at-home-do-nothing busybody, to report me. Or maybe something’s wrong with Ronny and he’s told Jenny not to make a big deal of it when she calls. Construction is a dangerous job, especially when you’re working alone. Those big beams. The sharp tools.
Jenny’s sniffling and I have to ask her to speak up.

“You can tell me anything, honey.”

“Yes, Mom, I know. Still, you’re gonna be mad.”

Oh, god, please don’t let it be one of those meddling social workers.

“It’s OK, honey, just tell me.” I look at my watch because we have two more fillings before I can quit at 4pm.

“Well, Sheila and I were playing tetherball in the back yard.”

I might have known it. Sheila. Concentrating on the photo of Lake Superior, I imagine myself on a North Shore vacation, relaxed and serene.

“And well, she had sneaked this pack of Kools from her mother and umm, we each smoked...a couple. Oh, Mom, I know I’m not allowed to smoke, but I thought one wouldn’t hurt. I didn’t mean to start the second; they didn’t taste that good anyhow.”

“How do you feel?”

“Pretty awful. I’ve been throwing up all afternoon. Am I going to get lung cancer?”

I’m smiling, holding back the relieved laughter. “No,” I say, “not from two cigarettes.”

“Ah, Mom, I’m so sorry.”

I’m touched, proud, that she would call to confess.

“So I guess I’m gonna get it when you come home,” her voice is quaking.

“Yes,” I answer in my firmest tone, distracted by the memory of Marie’s dazzling smile ten minutes before. “I’ll have to think of the proper discipline.”

“Yes, Mom.” She’s crying.

I warm up. “It’s good that you phoned. Very good. That was the right thing.”

“Thanks, Mom.” The words are a little quavery, from fear or nausea, I can’t tell.
“Drink some bubbly water and walk around the block a couple of times to clear your head,” I advise. “A bath might feel nice.”

On the bus home, I’m thinking: my world couldn’t get much better. Well, there is the matter of moving to our own place far from Mrs. Witch and her kids. But here I am, with two children who trust me, a kind, sexy lover with a quirky sense of humor, and a boss who thinks I’m an artist. What more could I want? A triple crown every few weeks; now that would make life just about perfect.

Valerie Miner is the award-winning author of 13 books including 7 novels, 4 collections of stories and 2 non-fiction books. Her work has appeared in more than sixty anthologies. She has won fellowships and awards from The Rockefeller Foundation, The McKnight Foundation, The NEA, The Jerome Foundation, The Heinz Foundation, The Australia Council Literary Arts Board and numerous other sources. She has received Fulbright Fellowships to Tunisia, India and Indonesia. Winner of a Distinguished Teaching Award, she is now a professor and artist in residence at Stanford University.