

# SYLVIE

Mama forced me into double-time walking, which I didn't mind because I was wearing my favourite dark brown corduroys. She said each one of her steps equalled two of mine, which meant I had to walk twice as fast. Mama wanted to make it to the shelter before five o'clock so that she could have the kitchen in peace. She had scored a can of beef gravy and a box of Hamburger Helper at the food bank, but in order to brown the meat properly she had to call dibs on the better stovetop and the better frying pan before Mrs Abdul "took over the whole goddamn show."

I couldn't hear much of Mama's complaining and nagging over the vrip, vrip, vrip of my corduroy inner thighs, and that suited me just fine. I'm kind of tired of listening to her talk about Johnny this and Johnny that. See, at first it seemed my little brother was gifted, being such a good climber and so good at picking locks, undoing zippers, clicking buckles in and out, running down the hallway. But when Mama noticed he did all of this to the tune of his constant humming, she knew she had to bring him to the walk-in clinic.

"Can I have his health card, please?" the receptionist asked. Mama nudged me and pointed to her bulky black purse under Johnny's stroller. I grabbed it and tried to lift it to her. It sure was heavy.

"Thank you, sweet girl." Mama patted me on the head. While we waited for the receptionist to check Johnny's health card, I hung on the counter like a monkey. "Get your hands off the counter, you silly goose!" I did what I was told, having gone from a sweet girl to a silly

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goose with one mistake.

The receptionist handed Mama a clipboard with a form on it. “Go ahead and have a seat. Just fill this out, and hand it to me when you’re done.” She suddenly turned to a shirtless man coming out of a room, the sounds of a toilet flushing behind him. He was zipping up his jeans. Her lips pursed. We stood frozen, not knowing what to do.

“Did you speak to the doctor yet, nurse?”

“Yes. And he says he cannot give you a prescription for that. Narcotics are not prescribed here.”

“You know what? I’m here to get medication for my anxiety, okay!?” He began to pace the waiting room. “And you not giving me what I want is giving me more anxiety!”

“Sir. I am going to need you to calm down.” The receptionist put her hand on the desk phone, like a threat.

He had a look on his face, like he knew something clever. Like he knew he was about to put all his cards down playing Go Fish. “What you’re doing is against the hypothetical oath! I’m going to call my lawyers right now!” He dug into his pockets and found his cellphone.

“Sir! There are no cellphones allowed in the clinic.”

He threw his hands into the air. “Aw, fuck! Fuck you all.” He slammed the door as he left.

We took our place in the U-shaped seating area.

“See, Mama? I told you I shouldn’t have come. Now I’ve missed Indian Taco Day at school.”

“Oh enough! You don’t understand how tricky it is, Sylvie,” Mama explained. “We gotta get in the clinic between noon and four to avoid the lineups. No fry bread for you right now, but you can

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wait until next time. Jeez.” She nudged me and pointed at a copy of *Chatelaine* magazine sitting on the coffee table. I fetched it for her. She patted me on the head. “Thanks, sweet girl.” I shook my head.

We sat in that waiting room for two whole hours. I watched a boy crawl underneath the coffee table and listened to him cough like he was choking on worms.

“Parker, sit down,” said his mom in a weak voice. “Parker? Parker, please. Come on. Can you sit down for me?” The kid kept crawling on the filthy floor.

Mama looked at me and rolled her eyes. She could write a book on parenting based on her eye rolls.

“Parker? Why don’t you sit down and have something to drink?” The mom searched her diaper bag and pulled out a bottle of Grape-C Plus. She shook it toward him like he was a cat looking at a treat. “Come on. Sit down. Please? Parker?”

Mama stomped her foot to get rid of her frustration. This parenting book she was writing in her head was getting awfully thick.

Parker finally came out from under the table, sat, and downed the pop. Then he was done sitting, so hopped up on sugar that he jumped from chair to chair and ripped out pages from outdated copies of *Reader’s Digest* issues piled around the seating area.

“Uh-oh. That’s not nice, Parker. No thank you. We don’t do that. Why don’t you sit down and have a chocolate bar?”

It was frustrating to watch—but our frustration was only just beginning.

“I think he’s got a problem,” Mama said to the doctor when we were finally called in.

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His eyes never left his prescription pad as he avoided eye contact with the Native woman before him—her hair, like brushed-out wool, hanging to her hips and framing her slightly bucked teeth, her accent as undulating as the East Coast landscape she came from.

“He’s three, but he doesn’t say much, and the rest of the time, he’s humming to himself.”

“Lots of kids sing to themselves, Miss Beaudoin.”

“You don’t understand. He doesn’t even look you in the eye when you’re talking to him. He’ll put anything in his mouth. I even threw a ball at him so’s I could see his reaction. He didn’t even raise his arms to protect his face. It was a soft ball, eh. Nothing hard, mind you. I just know there’s something wrong.”

It was too painful to watch my mother being ignored, so I took some tongue depressors from the counter and began making a fort with them. Johnny, of course, smashed my creation. Mama pried the sticks from Johnny’s hands and put them back on the counter. The doctor eyed the dirty tongue depressors and sighed.

Someone knocked on the door, and the doctor wheeled his stool toward it. He opened the door just a crack and began whispering to the receptionist on the other side.

“He’s back, Doctor.”

“Well, what did you tell him?”

“What I told him last time. That we don’t prescribe narcotics.”

“And?”

“He’s threatening to sue us.”

“He can’t sue us for not doling out oxycodone at a walk-in clinic.”

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“But he’s getting aggressive with me. I’m pretty sure he’s going to attack me.”

“Fine. I’ll be out in a second.”

The doctor turned back to Mama and sighed.

“Let’s just say something is wrong with Johnny. What do you achieve then?” He cracked his knuckles and rubbed his hands together.

Mama knew this was a trick question.

“Well ... I guess then we can find the right support for him.”

“It’s not like once you get a diagnosis for a learning disability, some specialist waves a magic wand and he’ll be healed, Miss Beaudoin. It’s a lot of work. And from what I understand of your situation, this is the least of your worries.”

Mama’s cheeks flushed. She gently pried the otoscope from Johnny’s hands and placed it back in its wall holder.

“My advice is to deal with one thing at a time.” The doctor was already standing with one hand on the doorknob. “Truth is, next year he’ll be in school. You can trust that a teacher will bring it up if there’s a problem. And if there is a problem, a specialist will visit the school for you.”

“Not at this school. This school doesn’t have the time or money, doctor.”

“Miss Beaudoin.” He took his glasses off. “I know you mentioned you’re at the Galloway Shelter. I can’t imagine how hard it is to deal with these challenges in such small quarters. But once your housing is settled and Johnny is a bit older, maybe then we can talk about assessments. There’s a lot of back and forth with specialists. A lot of

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booking appointments, phone calls, trips across town. Think about dealing with all of that in addition to what you're dealing with now. Besides, I have a strong feeling he's just a bit behind. Nothing to worry about."

The entire time Mama begged the fool for a referral, I thought how unfair it was that I was missing Rouge Hill Public School's Native Taco Day. And for nothing. I pictured my grade three classmates in line in the gym, the smell of chili powder and fry bread in the air. I could see the dollops of sour cream being dropped on each of the tacos, and the shreds of cheese. Mrs Falls, with her hair net and all, would have let me into the line without a toonie, giving me a knowing wink. I could have been there. Instead, I was rushing out of a stupid walk-in clinic, hoping to catch the Number 86 Scarborough so we could be back at the shelter before five.

At least I got to imagine the sensation of Hamburger Helper with extra gravy, filling my tummy. That's what went through my mind the entire bus ride home while I elbowed Johnny's sleeping head off of my shoulders over and over again like a yo-yo.

My earnest double-time walking was rewarded by the satisfying *shhhhh plop* of the noodles falling into the boiling water. I was asked to place the cardboard box in the recycling with the other boxes of food bank fare. All the labels looked back at me: bowls of hearty meals, steaming and smiling; a family far away who would rather have something fresh and fancy; a family far away wanting to teach their kids something about charity.

"But what about the directions?" I asked.

"I don't need directions for Hamburger Helper. I've had enough

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of it in my lifetime,” Mama said before ripping open the cheese sauce packet. A cloud of crayon orange revealed ribbons of sunlight in the shelter kitchen. We giggled, it was so pretty.

That’s when we saw Mrs Abdul by the door, giving my mama cut-eye when she saw how perfect our timing was. This made me and Mama giggle even more.

The next morning, dust from the bottom of the cereal box got caught in my eyes. I went to school squinting one eye and then the other, just so I wouldn’t bump into anything. Mama always warned me not to act stupid, otherwise the school counsellor would bring me to her office. This counsellor, Mrs Rhodes, likes to collect brown-people things and put them up on her wall. Things like coolie hats, dashikis, masks. Next to these brown-people things are pictures of her and her sunburnt children wearing the coolie hats, dashikis, and masks. I really wanted to play with the tea set she got from Japan, but everyone warned me. Indian kids who go into that office with cereal dust in their eyes are referred to an eye doctor who diagnoses eye disease and gives you a prescription, which your parents can’t afford, and the next thing you know, Children’s Aid is all up in your parents’ business wondering why they can’t afford any medicated drops for their children’s busted-up eyes. You walk in there a kid; you walk out of there a ward of the state. You can’t trust them, coolie hat or no coolie hat.

I crept past Mrs Rhodes’ office and into my classroom, pretending everything was right as rain. My new morning ritual involved taking my coat and backpack off right quick, hanging everything up as fast as lightning, and running like the wind to my desk. I imagined

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this would make it difficult for everyone in class to see I was wearing the same corduroys as yesterday. Mama works hard to ensure that we are as clean as possible, but with only three sets of clothes, National Thrift being so very far away, and a washing machine that is broken when it isn't being hogged by Mrs Abdul, it sometimes means turning my underwear inside out. It doesn't help that Johnny is in a phase where he eats anything off the floor. This week he really enjoyed eating markers. He barfed Crimson Red and Sky Blue all over his jacket—twice. Mama was so tired.

One day, just after dinner, Mama had an emergency. It was the type of emergency where she was opening drawers randomly, searching for things, and begging us not to ask her any more questions. She took me by the wrist, so I knew something was really wrong. Mama always holds me by the hand, our fingers intertwined, unless there is a missing piece of the puzzle, or the pieces are fitting together all wrong. These wrong things happen often, which is why I was familiar with the feeling. These wrong things explain the Why Here and the Why Now. But they never explain the Where To or the How Will We.

She frantically knocked on 215, the door of Mr George down the hall. He was Ojibwa and the only person that Mama both trusted and found available most times. Although Slutty Christy was super nice, Mama hated people who smoked in their room despite being steps from the shelter's back entrance. It was against the rules, and Christy just didn't care. At least Mr George was one of us and as harmless as an aloe plant.

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Mr George opened the door and nodded. I wasn't sure if he was agreeing to take me for a while, or if it was the Parkinson's. Either way, Mama pulled me inside and plopped me atop his couch, seated close enough to him to have a perfect view of the gaping hole at his throat. It was a warning to me, Mama said. Since the minute he was born, Mr George was smoking Rez cigarettes like it was his job. Those cigarettes burned right through him, making a doorway to his Adam's apple. I often sit on his couch for hours watching his strange throat hole move around like a jelly's mouth while he enjoys his afternoon of game shows on his old TV.

By the time Mama came to pick me up, I was asleep in Mr George's arms, hearing the prizes being announced on *Wheel of Fortune* somewhere far away in my dreams.

I had never really heard Mr George speak in full sentences before, and now he was mumbling something to Mama.

"I'm so sorry it took so long," Mama said, flustered. Mr George mumbled something again and Mama responded. "Exactly. Holy shit. The emergency room was packed."

Mr George gave me a pat on the head, and then I could feel Mama picking me up and hoisting me into an upright position, my chin rubbing against the nub of her shoulder. I could have woken up. I could have let her arms rest. But I knew she was sad about something, and this was the best hug I would get from her today. I breathed in the smell of her antiperspirant wafting up her shirt and pretended she was hugging me back.

She expertly placed me into my bed beside Johnny's crib, removed my socks, and put them by the window to air out for tomor-

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row. Mama tucked me in as she usually did, too tightly, from my toes right up to my chin, fabric gathered around my shoulders, a pillow on either side of me. She kissed my forehead quickly and like a mouse slipped through the door and left it ajar.

I twisted my body toward the action as much as I could despite Mama's swaddling. I watched her leave in a huff. She came back with Johnny in his stroller, sleeping and covered in a blanket. She left the room again, and came back later with Michelle, the shelter supervisor. Dad was sandwiched between them. They inched forward, looking down at their feet and in step with one another, like it was a slow dance. I could tell the weight of Dad was pulling on the long dreads down Michelle's back because her chin was slightly cocked to one side, and her face was twisting.

"Can you lift your foot?" Michelle said.

My dad grunted.

"Marie, can you open the door a bit wider? Perfect. I'm going to hold your elbow right here, Jonathon. Okay, good. We're clear of that door."

"You got the keys, Michelle?"

"In my pocket."

They inched forward. Dad's neck was in a brace. He moaned with his mouth open at every movement.

"Jonathon, Marie. The couch is right behind you. We are going to do this together. Get your bum down right here."

"You think this is a good place to put him?"

"It'll have to do. Okay. Can you get that pillow over there, Marie? No, the bigger one. We can elevate his legs a bit."

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One long moan, and my dad was in his spot. It would remain his spot for several weeks.

Michelle turned on the living room lamp to assess the situation. She looked around. My mama and dad were on the couch, tired and hungry, glad for quiet.

“Okay, Marie. This is what I’m going to do. I can see if Mrs Abdul is willing to trade suites with you so that you can be on the ground floor.”

“She won’t do that. Not for us.”

“Well, let’s see. Jonathon can barely walk, let alone make it to the elevator, even with two people helping him.” Michelle noticed my mama frowning, figuring things out in her head. “Tonight you sleep. Can you promise me that?”

“I’ll try.” Mama didn’t have the strength to laugh, but she managed to give Michelle a goofy smile.

Michelle giggled a little. “At least you get the bed to yourself. Think about that. I even envy you right now.” She made that sound she usually makes, sucking air through the gap in her front teeth when she disapproves of something.

Mama smiled weakly. “I think I’ll probably sleep here on the couch. I’m too scared.”

“I hear you, I hear you.” Michelle placed a hand on Mama’s shoulder, which melted at the touch. “You are a good mother and wife, Marie.”

Michelle left. There was a long silence, long enough that I dozed off in the pool of quiet, until I heard the cupboards opening and closing.

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“Can you at least swallow?” Mama asked Dad as he used his one good arm to try to close his jaw. The soup just dribbled down his chin. “Damn it, Jonathon! What am I gonna do? Open up another can of soup? An imaginary can of soup? We have nothing!”

Dad always looked at the feet of people who were shouting at him when he failed. *Go on, now. Just let it loose and leave me be*, his face seemed to say. Usually when he had this face, he would storm out for long periods of time and come back to Mama crying and begging him to stop visiting the off-track betting place on Ellesmere Road.

This time, though, his big rig had jackknifed on Highway 401 because he was in a rush to get ahead of schedule and ended up falling asleep at the wheel. Now, with all of his injuries, even old Mr George could outrun him. I knew it was a bad time to ask if I could sign his cast, so I continued to pretend to sleep.

Johnny was still in his stroller, dead to the world, sucking his bottom lip.

### **DAILY REPORT**

September 14, 2011

**Facilitator:** Hina Hassani

**Location:** Rouge Hill Public School

**Attendance:**

<b>Parent/Guardian/Caregiver</b>	<b>Children</b> (one per line please)
Lily Chan	Aiden Chan
	Jennifer Chan

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Helen McKay

Finnegan Everson

Sebastian Dennis

Liam Williams

Chloe Smith

Amina Mohammed

Waleed Mohammed

Edna Espiritu

Bernard Espiritu

Marie Beaudoin

Sylvie Beaudoin

Johnny Beaudoin

### Notes:

A bit of a slow day today since the centre has just opened within the school. Lots of parents dropping off their kids to school are under the impression this is a daycare and walk past. Some think it is a drop-off space to leave their kids and not a place to play with their preschool children. I'm trying to stay by the door of the centre to greet everyone in the school hallway passing by and to let them know they can come in if they need play-time. Funny enough, since many of the parents in this neighbourhood are English as a Second Language, passing them brochures about the Ontario Reads Literacy Program isn't really catching on. I'm wondering if we could have the brochure translated into other languages. The one thing that's easy to convey is morning and afternoon snack time. As it's a low-in-

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come community, parents in this area seem to be quite eager for opportunities to feed their kids.

Today's most popular activities included the sand table, the animal shape sorter, and the magnet magic station. Circle time went very well, despite the quietness at the centre. The kids were full of beans, so I did lots of stand-up songs. Baby Waleed, as usual, thoroughly enjoyed the rainbow song. I make sure I sing it every time he drops in.

There are some great characters who visit me regularly. One elderly woman parks her scooter outside our doors, comes in for a coffee, then leaves. I'm unsure if she has any children who actually attend the school at Rouge Hill. There's a toddler named Johnny, whom I will be observing closely over the next while for the possibility of learning disabilities. There have been some complaints from some of the caregivers and parents about his behaviour, but I haven't found anything troublesome. I just think he will need more support, and I think the mother, Marie, is a bit overwhelmed. I will observe for now and consider a good time to converse with her as to how I can support her so Johnny can be integrated better

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into our activities. There are some older kids who attend the centre before class. One of them, Bing, and I have a deal that he can peruse my special closed cabinet of toys as long as he cleans it up. He has very much enjoyed playing with the Little Scientist kit. He has been looking at everything from tissue paper to fingernails under this mini microscope.

Helen, one of our regular home daycare providers who regularly attends the centre, has asked if she can donate a set of twenty plastic picnic plates so that we don't have to use the coffee filters for plates. I told her I would ask management. Let me know your thoughts.

### **Weekly supplies requested**

2% milk	three bags
Cheerios	two boxes
cucumbers	two large
cheese	marble, one large block
strawberries	one carton (just a pint is fine, since these go bad easily in our tiny fridge!)
high chair	lots of babies, please send immediately!