

MAYBE I'M NOT CUT OUT TO BE A CHILD CARE WORKER AFTER ALL

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I rushed to the staff bathroom and quickly, but gently, splashed cold water on my throbbing face. I looked into the mirror. For a flash of a second I wanted to ask myself just what I was doing here—in this position, in this job. But I didn't have time to get reflective. My red, swollen, teary-eyed face stared back at me and reminded me that I had to get back out there with the kids. Hopefully, my nose wasn't broken. If I didn't make a fast recovery and quick return to the unit, I knew I would be in for worse before shift's end.

A broken nose wasn't nearly as traumatic as the humiliation of getting beaten by one of the kids. Not beaten up, but it might as well have been. Wasn't I supposed to be the strong you-can-always-count-on-me adult? The one who could control these girls, using physical restraint if necessary, when they couldn't control themselves, when they were in danger of hurting themselves or others. Wasn't I supposed to hold that girl without hurting her until the rage subsides? That's the way it's supposed to be. So what happened? What about my own rage, my own hurt? I looked in the mirror. There it was. Already outlining itself on my aching face. More than the humiliation—a reminder. Sure enough, the outline of that hard tennis shoe sole appeared across my nose and angled down my cheek. Stop feeling sorry for yourself, Sara! Just think, if it is broken you may get that nose-job you've been wanting for years.

The kids were calling me just outside the door. Beth and Mary had actually come to my rescue for a change when they pulled Anna off of me. How was I supposed to feel about that, for Chrissake? That thought wasn't so bad. Gave me a bit of a warm feeling. Naw, the worry about whether I could really take care of the girls, or worse yet, whether the girls would doubt my ability to care for them washed that warmth away quickly. There wasn't any room in this job for physical weakness. My nose felt better, but somehow I wasn't sure about the rest of me.

"I'm all right, girls. Just wiping my face a bit. Come on. Everyone's to be in their rooms now. Did snack dishes get cleared away? Come on, let's go. Everything's all right now," I assured, trying to convince myself as well as Beth and Mary.

"Sara, Anna's in her room laughing. She's so weird. Are you okay?" Mary asked, amazing me with the nurturing maturity in her voice as she prattled on.

Closing the bathroom door and putting my arm around Mary, I said, "I'm okay. Thanks for helping out, but don't worry. I'll go check on Anna soon. She's probably more shook up than I am. You two get on down to your rooms now. Scoot!"

Mary giggled. But Beth was quiet. A concerned quiet, but I recognized that other part of it, too. I knew it would surface sometime. Her thoughts, "You're not so tough, Sara. Maybe you're not stronger than me. Maybe when I really need you you won't be there. Maybe..."

I walked the girls down the hallway, dropped them off at their rooms. There was an unusual quiet in the unit except for the bizarre giggling coming from behind Anna's closed door. I thought for a moment as I turned out the hall lights, "Yeah, Beth, I'm human. Not Superwoman like you'd like me to be. Like this job sometimes demands."

Bedtime routine was back on track. I turned on the small lamps and grabbed the book, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, I'd be reading in just a few minutes. First came tuck-ins. The thought never occurred to me to do anything but get on with the routine. The girls needed routine. Despite the quiet, I knew the girls had been scared. Knew they'd have an even harder time than usual falling asleep. I didn't know, though, what Anna might do next.

Anna was unpredictable all right. I knew I had to check in on her. The thought unnerved me. Maybe I'm not cut out to be a child care worker after all. I knew it wouldn't be all fun and games; treetag, swimming, tennis, cooking, sewing, and reading. But I didn't know, really know, it would be: Hellen Keller scenes at the meal table, barages of profanity greeting me shift after shift, playing referee instead of catch each game attempted, starting for a movie to find a hair pulling, eye scratching sideshow fight in the van just out of the driveway, or being attacked when I turn my back on a very disturbed girl and wearing her footprint across my face. Designer footprints are just not IN.

And I didn't know about the confusion it all created. My own confusion about what I was feeling made me leery of facing Anna. Anna was the most disturbed girl we had in treatment. She had the most grueling of case histories. It was the one that makes me get philosophical; how could someone do that to a child? Why are people like that parents in the first place? It doesn't pay to think such thoughts. All I know is that there is something awfully eerie about Anna's sick rage. It had a contagious element. Not so much for the

kids. This raging loss of control didn't invite the others to join in. It was too personal. That made it too scary for those not quite so disturbed. Instead, the danger was the adult's who tried to provide the controls, trying to put your own feelings in your back pocket with all that rage and anger directed toward you. And you know why it's there and you can't blame the rage at all. You just don't want to be its target. I guess that's where the years of experience come in—the empathy expert. Or so the experienced folks say. But, meanwhile, who cared about my thoughts and feelings at this moment? This was all part of the job—a few teeth marks, nail digs, scars here and there. I reminded myself why I was here. To care for these kids. These adolescent girls needed me. Especially Anna. Slowly, I was feeling settled within myself, re-composed. What option did I have?

I was working the unit alone tonight as I did every Saturday night. There was no such thing as calling for help. All the units were single coverage. The supervisor? Ha! She worked 9 to 5 weekdays. The only time I could recall her coming in was when the whole unit, overcrowded and understaffed, was nuts with girls running all over grounds waking kids in other units, trying to entice boys to join the antics, scaring the little fellas half to death, and periodically returning to this unit to literally destroy it—throwing furniture, smashing their most prized art projects, climbing the bathroom stalls. Yeah, then the supervisor and therapist came in. Total chaos forging a head start before their arrival.

Naw, the routine is my only solace. I set the book on the hall chair as I prepared to give the tuck-ins. I started at the end of the hallway. Carol was almost asleep. Little Carol. Mildly retarded, "EMR," the official label. Tonight's incident was probably a little hairier than those times she'd assert herself with overturning a few chairs back home. I sat at the edge of the bed and pulled the cover up to Carol's shoulder. "Good night. See you in the morning."

"Yeah, yeah, good night, Sara. You're okay, right. Good night."

I opened the next door slowly. It was dark in the room. Cindy was in bed. I had to step over a bathrobe and other stuff strewn all over the floor. Cindy's usual barricade. Cindy let out her funny little giggle. Like Carol, Cindy wasn't much for cuddly stuff. I could barely see her tiny black outline in the bed, but made my way to its edge and sat. Cindy squirmed and laughed her nervous laugh, which said things were not right with her. "My night light burned out, Sara. Remember, I need a new bulb. You said you'd let me go to Walgreens and get one."

"Oh yeah, we forgot, didn't we?"

And then Cindy began with her speedy prattle that I half listened to as I reached down and began folding the discarded robe. Cindy went

on about her disgust for Anna and all Anna does. Like tonight. Staying in her room during snack, talking to herself in a strange old-lady like voice, and then popping out periodically to throw things at everyone in the alcove. I could barely make out all of Cindy's complaints. When she was uncomfortable she rambled on so quickly that she was difficult to understand.

I'm afraid, unintentionally, I wasn't being attentive. Cindy was just unwinding. I placed the folded robe over Cindy's desk chair. Boy, Cindy's desktop was a mess! Come to think of it, the whole room was a mess again. Cindy wasn't the neatest teenager. I guess that made her pretty typical. The desk was cluttered with cheap nail polish bottles, Afro hair products, colored pencils and, of course, little food bits. Cindy always hoarded food snacks, especially sunflower seeds. She could never get filled up. That was typical, too, of most of the kids here in treatment. Well, you could never fill Cindy up or shut her up, I thought, as I realized she was still rambling on. "Get to sleep now. I know there's a lot on your mind, but try to relax. We'll talk tomorrow."

"Okay, but just make sure that crazy Anna don't come down here or I'll beat the shit out of her crazy self. She don't scare me, that girl..."

"Hush, hush. See you tomorrow." No one ever told Cindy her six-foot-two mouth didn't go well with her four-foot-ten body.

I left the door open a crack so the hall light would leave a soft glow, and I headed for Rachel's room. Rachel was on a weekend home visit, but I thought I'd double check her window to make sure it was locked. Nice thing about weekends, I thought, every once in a while some of the kids are ready to go back home for visits. This weekend was rare. I had three girls gone.

I walked into Mary's room to find her puttering busily with all sorts of newly collected junk: discarded snack cups, bits of material, leftover pieces to old games. I instructed Mary to hop into bed as I weeded through the maze she'd created on the floor.

"Me was waiting for you, Sara." There it was, Mary's baby voice. Her earlier age appropriate response to tonight's incident was short-lived. Mary vacillated between rough-tough teenager and helpless preschooler, the latter being the most prevalent.

Mary spoke through the fingers in her mouth, "Sara, me not tired. Can me stay up and work on my fort? I'll use my night light. Can me, Sara?"

"No, Mary. Tuck-in time. I'm going to start reading soon, and I don't want to see you out of bed at all," I answered firmly but gently.

Mary gave me a clingy hug that I smoothly pried out of and, taking leave, turned out her light and said good night.

Next I entered Beth's room. I realized I was growing terribly tired

myself. Beth was lying awake with her hands folded behind her head as a pillow, waiting for me to get to her. I wondered just what she'd have to say, if she was going to verbalize that look I had gotten earlier. I really didn't feel up to dealing with that. Despite this thought, I was somewhat looking forward to a few words from Beth. She was my favorite.

That seems funny. To have a favorite, that is. It doesn't make the job any easier. There's a bit of irony in it. I mean, most of these kids are labeled "undesirables" in society. They've either messed up at school or at home or run away from both. They're not used to an adult genuinely liking them no matter how rotten they behave at times. In fact, they pour an awful lot of energy into making sure they make you as miserable as they possibly can just for having committed the sin of growing up and becoming an adult. But every once in a while I guess it happens that a kid and an adult can't help liking each other. Their personalities just click. They share the same sense of humor, like the same sort of things. It's inevitable. A real friendship occurs. I wouldn't go so far as to say trusting friendship, it's a bit too much to expect an emotionally disturbed youth to magically trust in what has been a very cruel, unpredictable world.

"It's about time you got to me, Sara," Beth quietly snapped. "I was kinda worried about you. How's your face? Besides bein' ugly, that is. Haaa. Couldn't resist."

"I bet you couldn't, kiddo." I made my way to her bed and sat down. I thought about how easy it was to get to Beth's bed. Unlike Cindy, Beth always kept her room neat and relatively clean. She kept herself neat and clean, too. She was one of the youngest girls on the unit but no one would guess it. She stood five foot eight with a very toned, statuesque, brownskinned body. I'll never forget the first time I met her. She was only twelve, but I guessed she was fifteen. Her size had a lot do with it, but she also exuded a maturity that later proved to be more genuine than most of the other girls'. She had definite leadership qualities and, though not without her problems, really wasn't an acting out child. She had a mouth on her all right. When one tangled with that tongue it was like losing to the best lasso artist at the rodeo. That sharp teenage-girl tongue - phew. So many colleagues preferred the younger child to avoid that sting. I didn't mind it though. I figured I was in for a round of it right now.

"Sara, seriously, I was really scared when I saw how you were pinned between Anna's bed and the wall, and Anna hangin' on to your hair and kickin' you in the face like that. I mean I know I've given you a rough time now and then...but I never really wanted to hurt you. You know what I mean, Sara?"

"Yeah, I know, Beth," I whispered.

"You know what's made me more scared than seein' Anna kick you? You know, I been layin' here thinkin' about how we kids act up sometimes and act so stupid and all," Beth began in her junior-counselor fashion. "And I know that I have better controls than I sometimes use, and I know that I do that crap for attention, but... Well, Sara, I'm just afraid this did it for you. I mean, I guess if I was you I wouldn't want to work with kids like Anna, like us, I mean. Ya know what I mean, Sara?" With that last question she had sat up, put her arms around my neck, and hugged me tightly. She cried softly.

"Hey, kiddo, I came in here for a hug not a shower." I eased her arms from around my neck and she rested back on her pillows. I pulled her covers up on her gently and added, "Now, it's a good night to you because I still have one more tuck-in, and I'm due back here at seven a.m. If you want me to get home in time to get my beauty rest—Lord knows I need all I can get—then you better say good night and let me go on about my business."

I could see a little smile on her face as she rolled over and nestled under her blankets. As I left the room I heard the faint voice saying, "This don't mean I may never give you a hard time again though. Ha Ha."

On to the next and the last one I thought. Anna. I moved across the hall to Anna's room. Her door was tightly shut. I didn't know what to expect. I did know that I had learned one lesson the hard way. Never turn my back on Anna, whether she seemed settled and quiet or not. I did it. I opened the door. There was Anna. Sound asleep.

I stood there just looking at her for a moment. She looked so peaceful. So painless and untortured. I had seen many a time when Anna had been lost in a world of her own—a world of obsessions that she could not escape from. Compulsive behaviors enwrapped her whole being. She performed the strangest rituals that only her past understood.

Now . . . now she lay there sleeping, breathing softly and evenly. I felt a sort of sadness as I watched her sleep. A sense of Helplessness. Not for myself against her, but rather for the fact that I couldn't do anything magic to chase away the evils of her world. An enchantress I wasn't. A child care worker I was. I leaned over her and pulled the rumpled covers up over her arms, softly brushed the tousled hair off her face, and whispered, "Good night, Anna, see you in the morning."