

The Bloodhound

She told me once: Even nice people are secretly mean

By TOM McMILLAN Illustrations by BYRON EGGENSCHWILER

BEFORE THE CAR comes to a stop, Maxi is on her feet and reaching for the door handle.

Her hair is shorter than I remember. Dyed red now, too. She leaps into the frayed passenger seat and I press hard on the gas, peeling away from Nick and Sandra's like bank robbers fleeing the scene. For a second, I wonder what Jordan is doing right now, then make myself wonder anything else.

This morning, the city felt like a sauna. Now the sky is black and pelting rain. We have hours to fill and every idea I had involved going outside, so I toss over a grocery bag to buy time to think. A hungry Maxi is a cranky Maxi, so I bought Snickers, Swedish Fish, even a Red Bull and smokes—all the deeply unhealthy things that her foster parents would never buy in a billion years. I like coming prepared for these visits, probably to compensate for how unprepared I've been for everything up to now.

Am I terrible for buying cigarettes? My sister's only 15. No mom and no dad. Chunky in all the wrong places, stalked and mocked by anonymous accounts that trolls at her school create. Even nice people are secretly mean, she told me once, and I still think about that. Lung cancer is a long-term problem. Maxi is miserable now.

Virgin Radio is playing hits from the '90s, the kind that mom used to sing in the kitchen. Thunder cracks above, but no lightning, as Maxi tears open

the candy without saying thank you. Ambulance sirens scream behind us. Ahead, there's a McDonalds with the lights turned off.

We meander through the city, cursing the clouds, until I suggest the corn maze.

"It's raining," she replies.

"You can do a maze in the rain."

She chews on Swedish Fish. "Let's just go to the mall or something."

No malls. During our awkward pre-visit phone call, Sandra hammered that point repeatedly. West Edmonton Mall was off limits. *I don't know what you did Saturday night, but your sister passed out in the parking lot*, Sandra said, as though the mall and I were in cahoots together.

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Sandra and Nick are worried about binge drinking; I'm worried about who she was drinking with. Maxi is a loner. She has zero close friends. Seeing her now, with that shitty haircut, shoved into a shirt that is slightly too small even though I've offered to buy her clothes using my employee discount at Costco, I wonder who got Maxi so

drunk that doctors had to pump her stomach. Or maybe I don't want to know. Life is messed up. No matter how smart or ready you think you are, there is always something else waiting, something darker and scarier than you'd let yourself imagine.

We are driving in circles. She cracks the window an inch and lights a Camel, staring at her phone. As kids, people used to call us opposites. I was loud and Maxi was quiet; I was bone skinny and she was big-boned. Press us together and a pair of normal-sized, well-behaved girls would appear.

"I saw Jordan last weekend at Cinnabon," she says. "Tell your boyfriend that his friends are assholes."

Ex-boyfriend, I think before changing the subject.

"What's Nick like? Sandra seems alright."

The first time I met Maxi's foster parents, they struck me as cold. He gave a bone-crushing handshake that was surely intentional. She offered me a glass of water and a 20-minute lecture on her garden, while Jesus listened from a wooden cross above the stove. The entire house had a silent vibe, like the dated furniture and oatmeal-coloured walls sucked up all the noises inside. Not that I'd tell Maxi any of that.

"They love protein shakes."

I glance over. "What?"

"Literally, all we have to eat in the house are protein shakes, kale salads and kombucha. I'm going to the bathroom, like, every 20 minutes."

We merge onto the Whitemud, still heading nowhere but without traffic

lights. “Heathy food is a good sign. It means they care, right?”

No response from Maxi. Just a look that tells me to stop being stupid.

“I heard something happened at the mall,” I continue, shifting into the sisterly advice portion of our trip.

“They’re liars.”

“Who? Nick and Sandra?”

“All of them. That social worker doesn’t even reply when I text.”

We have to do something. We can’t just cruise around, wasting gas all night. I scan the passing streets for ideas while Maxi complains about getting ghosted by her social worker and about Nick searching her backpack like she’s a drug mule. She jokes about turning anorexic this summer.

Cracking the Red Bull, Maxi does this thing where she grins as she drinks. For a second, I see our dad.

“So you didn’t get drunk and have your stomach pumped?”

She rolls her eyes and sips the energy drink. “Are we going to the mall or what?”

Once, Maxi got lost in West Edmonton Mall. This was years ago, back when it was the biggest mall in the world, a preposterous combination of retail stores and theme park attractions. There were sea lions and submarines, roller coasters and waterslides. An ice rink. An indoor lake. To us, the mall was a circus that would never leave town.

We were waiting in line for the submarine ride when Maxi vanished. Our dad, talking on his cell phone, never noticed, but I did. One moment she was standing beside me. The next, there was no sign of her, just wave after wave of Boxing Day crowds. Dad called security, but I was like a bloodhound, racing from store to store, tracing her scent. Eventually I found Maxi hiding on the pirate ship that the mall rents out for parties, watching the sea lion show across the lake. She squeezed my chest so hard it hurt to breathe.

Dad loved telling that story. It was so central to me and Maxi, told and retold so many times that I can imagine every detail, even though I have no memory of it. Eyes closed, I picture myself searching for her. I see myself darting

between gaps in the rushing crowd. What 7-year-old can track a toddler in a crowded mall? What child climbs aboard a replica of the Santa Maria, sensing her sister is hidden inside?

West Ed isn’t the biggest mall in the world anymore. It’s been knocked down to sixth or seventh. The stores are mostly yuppie brands, the food courts are nasty and animal rights activists keep petitioning to get the sea lions removed. They say the living conditions are inhumane.

“The rain is slowing,” I say, as though Maxi isn’t sitting right beside me, watching the same windshield wipers wave.

The corn maze is just outside the city. I haven’t been in years and have no idea how the place ever got started. Maybe some farmer was bored or maybe he figured there was more money in letting people wander through his crop than in harvesting it. A girl in my high school lost her virginity in the maze, which always struck me as tragic. Sex is enough of a maze already. Jordan kept telling me how bad I was at it.

“You just lie there,” he complained, but what else was I supposed to do?

Maxi stares out the window. Silence means her brain and heart are having a tug-of-war over her tongue.

Pulling off the highway, we drive west, gravel crunching under the tires. I stop the car. A chained gate blocks the turnoff to the grassy area where vehicles once parked. The farmhouse that sold T-shirts and crabapple jelly sits abandoned, and a crop that’s definitely not corn bursts through the field.

Maxi is not impressed. “We drove all that way for this?”

“When I was in high school, people used to hook up in the maze.” Her face wrinkles in disgust, so I add, “Don’t you remember Dad and Mom taking us here?”

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means her brain and heart are having a tug-of-war over her tongue.

“I wrote her a letter,” she says. “I just need to find Mom’s email address.”

Good luck with that. What Maxi doesn’t know is that I tracked our mom down a few months ago. A friend of mine from high school heard from his stepdad that she was living near Brampton. It took a week to find the phone number and another week to get her to answer my calls.

Our mom’s voice used to ring through the house like a smoke alarm. The woman on the other end of the phone sounded thin and scratchy. She could’ve been a stranger.

“Dad’s dead,” I said. “He was driving home late one night and got T-boned by some drunk. Well, they were both drunk.”

A beat passed.

“Nobody told me,” Mom said eventually.

“Nobody knew how to get ahold of you.”

“So, Carson’s dead.” I heard a lighter spark. “It’s like a bad dream.”

“Maxi needs a place to live. Children’s Services is putting her in foster care unless we find a place for her.”

She exhaled a drag of something. “Ask your grandparents to take her.”

“They wouldn’t even pay for the funeral.”

“My life’s a mess right now. You’re over 18, right?”

“This isn’t like losing her at the mall. I can’t save her on my own.”

“Oh, honey, has nobody told you?” Another drag washed over the line. “That story’s bullshit. Carson had you girls playing hide-and-seek in that mall so he could get pissed on Bourbon Street.”

“You’re lying.”

“I’ll send money as soon as I can,” she mumbled before I hung up.

When she and Dad used to fight, the shouting got so loud it shook the dishes. After Mom left, our house fell silent. Dad drank PC Pilsner until he passed out watching TV in the basement. Maxi started eating meals in her room. I moved in with Jordan and visited as little as possible.

Beside me, Maxi is still staring at the corn maze's fallen glory.

"You okay over there?"

"Nick and Sandra run the house like a boot camp. They keep telling me to go to HIIT classes and keep a food journal. They hate me because I'm fat."

"What's an HIIT class?"

"High Intensity Interval Training. It's stupid."

"You're not fat. Some people are just built bigger."

Once again, Maxi looks at me as if I'm the dumbest person alive.

I think about things that aren't my fault. I didn't make Mom run off. I didn't tell Dad to drink and drive that night, and I definitely did not choose to have Jordan dump me for some thirsty Earls waitress with a flat stomach and her daddy's Lexus.

"Any word on us living together?"

I shake my head. "It's not really a good time."

Maxi nods. "No worries."

There probably is a way to tell Maxi how messed up my life is now. How Costco hired more part-time staff, cutting my shift schedule in half. How Jordan ordered pizza last Sunday and told me he'd met someone else. I had two weeks to move out, leaving me in this strange netherworld of living in a place where I'm not wanted, with a man who is no longer mine.

"No worries," Maxi repeats. "What are we doing now?"

"Want me to take you back?"

She shakes her head.

"Okay, let's go see Dad."

In the months since he died, Maxi hasn't once visited the cemetery. I could make her, but I don't.

Your sister needs boundaries more than a friend right now, Sandra told me, but that just means Sandra's never needed a friend. I mean really needed it.

Besides, Maxi isn't really a kid anymore. If I look hard enough, I can see fragments hidden beneath the hunch and silence—Mom's nose and Dad's eyes. They're buried deep, and the longer I stare the more the baby inside the girl



disappears, leaving only a woman-child that I can't help fix.

We wind from street to avenue, avenue to freeway, freeway to street. Over the Walterdale Bridge. The roads are spotted with puddles. Eventually we park outside Wine and Beyond, buy a six-pack of watermelon coolers and sit on the hood of my car. I drink while she smokes, tossing chunks of Snickers to the seagulls. I watch Jordan's best friend, Derrick, walk into the liquor store. I'd forgotten he lived around here. Derrick must spot me too, because he comes marching back out.

"This is a surprise," he says, all smiles. "That was some crazy rain, huh?"

"Definitely. Maxi, this is Jordan's friend, Derrick."

Killing her cigarette, Maxi mumbles something about it getting late. She hops off the hood and gets back into the car. Derrick's eyes linger on her a second longer than necessary.

"I've been meaning to text you," he says. "I think Jordan made a huge mistake."

"Tell me something I don't know."

"If you ever need a place to crash, you can always call me."

"I'll remember that."

Derrick is twice my size. He steps closer and touches my forearm. "You want to grab a drink later?"

"I'm with my sister."

A grin. "She can come too."

The sun is setting, turning the sky into an aging bruise. "Fuck off."

For a second, I see it—the anger that lurks inside of men. They try to hide it. The good ones might dilute it, but

there is kerosene in their blood, waiting for a spark.

Suddenly the horn erupts. He flinches and I jump. Maxi is glaring daggers from the passenger seat, left hand on the steering wheel.

The horn blares again. Honestly, I've never loved her more.

By the time we park in front of Nick and Sandra's place, the sky is dim. Moths dance in the headlights. My head is sloshing a little but

I crack another watermelon cooler anyway. The street is silent and empty and for a moment it feels like we are the last two people alive.

"So you're homeless now," Maxi says.

"Not yet, but soon."

"I could see if Nick and Sandra have a room."

I laugh and think about ending the night right there. "Listen, I've got to tell you something."

Her face is open, defenseless. In the fading light, Maxi looks nothing like Mom or Dad or me or anyone else I know.

"Remember how I saved you that day at the mall? I think Dad made the whole thing up."

She blinks. "Sounds like him all right."

There's country music playing on the radio. I roll down the window, smell the humid air and the engine exhaust. Maxi lights two cigarettes and passes me one.

"Sandra wanted me in by 11," she says. "I should go."

"I could stay parked here for a while. Just in case you need to escape for a smoke or something."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

After she disappears inside, I watch the house lights flicker on, then back off. I recline the driver's seat and use my jacket for a blanket, thinking that my mom is probably right. The mall story might be bullshit, but it doesn't matter. There's a reason we believed it. ■

Tom McMillan lives in Edmonton. His fiction has also been published in Grain, the Toronto Star and Dalhousie Review.