

Monday rolled round again and we were all ready for the first lesson. Art therapy. It's okay, if you like chaos. Believe me, some of the others here make Jackson Pollock look like he's taken lessons from the Old Masters. Their 'art work' is like an elephant has taken a leap into a puddle and someone held up a canvas to capture the splat. Where's the genius in that? I prefer to sketch my creation first. I have my complete set of pencils arranged in graphite grading order, soft to hard. I start with a 4H to get a light but meaningful outline and then, add light and shade with anything from an F to a 5B. Anything past the five and the teacher tells me I'm being too angry. What? It's black. It's not emotional. She reckons that colours signify the deeper subconscious and that I need to experiment more with my Derwents than my grey leads. What she doesn't get is that it's the order in which you achieve the final outcome that is important. Grey leads first, get the outline right, then add the colour you need for the final effect. It's unfortunate that the lesson is too short for me to finish. I rarely get past the initial sketching. And so my report says things like:

*Micki prefers to create geometric patterns during art therapy indicative of a logical mind and her preference for an ordered world. It would be beneficial for her to spend time creating random shapes and using splashes of colour to help express her emotions.*

Micki does not need to 'express her emotions' in 'splashes of colour'. I'm just fine. THANKS. I just need you to give me more time to complete the task, then you'd see what I was actually trying to create.

Anyway, so half way through the class, when I'd done the outer border of my sketch, Elinor with the bad skin around her mouth and the eyes that point in different directions, stole one of my pencils. She just got up and grabbed my 3500 Prussian

Blue and started scribbling with it like it was a home brand crayon. The teacher didn't care. She knows Elinor is a thief and she never stops her. But I did. I wanted to let Elinor know what she was doing was wrong. I marched over to her and tried to get the pencil back but when I reached out she fell over, hitting her head on the easel. I screamed at her, not because she stole my pencil, but because she'd messed up my colours when she fell and apparently that was why I got removed from the class.

*Micki continues to antagonise some of the other members of the class with her brusque behaviour and sometimes threatening body language. On this occasion she was placed in the library room for a time out period where she was observed by a classroom assistant recounting the event multiple times.*

And it was when I was out of the room that the crime occurred. Someone stole a guinea pig. Guinea pigs are cute, if you like fluffy animals. I don't really like to touch them because they might be dirty. Most animals have some kind of mite or flea infestation however well they are cared for. Kids like Elinor get all silly over them but I would rather cuddle my maths book. Anyway, the amusing facet of guinea pig ownership in this place is the names chosen for our classroom pair: Mulder and Scully, a nod to a 90s sci-fi show which I committed to studying as soon as the animals were named. The choice of names was made even more interesting by the fact that Mulder and Scully are both female. I disliked this arrangement for some time but then my father told me sometimes odd things are beautiful. I accepted this reasoning, not for its plausibility, but because my father had said it.

Anyway, someone stole a guinea pig. The one called Mulder, meaning Scully was left without a mate. Not that she seemed to mind, as squirreled herself into a mound of shredded paper. Can a guinea pig squirrel? Or do they guinea?

I started my investigation with the obvious.

'Elinor. You have a nasty habit of taking things that aren't yours. Did you take Mulder?'

She just looked at me. I held her stare, which was difficult because I had to move left to right to counterbalance her skewed gaze. I went to her bag and rummaged through it. I found some interesting items: a plastic knife, two green crayons, a hair tie that had a clump of red hair knotted in it, so clearly didn't belong to the blonde Elinor, and several browning apples. At least it wasn't a squashed guinea pig. I went to the bathroom and scrubbed away her detritus. The teacher came to collect me.

*Micki must limit her time in the bathroom. She is expert at washing her hands but needs to be reminded that she is not scrubbing up for surgery. We have a strict operating budget and we are currently using above the requisite amount of hand soap and sanitiser.*

I asked the teacher some pertinent questions on the return to the classroom.

'When did you last see the guinea pig?'

'This morning.'

'Did it seem comfortable?'

'Micki, it's a classroom guinea pig in a cage, not a guest at the Hilton.'

I suspected sarcasm. 'What I'm trying to ascertain is whether the guinea pig might have been sick and therefore could potentially have been removed from its cage for a visit to the vet.'

She stopped outside the classroom, her hand resting on the door handle. I was willing her to open it but she merely twisted it back and forth. It was infuriating. I scrunched my hands up. 'The guinea pig was fine. I don't know where it's gone. You don't need to worry about it. We'll move classrooms shortly and Mr Claymore can organise a search. It's probably in a cupboard somewhere having a whale of a time.'

This scenario upset me on two counts. The first was the idea that Mulder was enjoying freedom. This could not be countenanced. An animal in captivity can be likened to a lifer in prison. Any change to the environment would cause great distress. Mulder was likely in the throes of deep panic and may become so stressed that heart failure could cause her death. Whilst I am ambivalent towards the creatures I would not want the class pet to pass away in such a manner. The second thing that upset me was the change of classroom that the teacher was mooting. This was most disturbing. I returned to the bathroom. The soap container was near empty and I had to visit the stock cupboard to replenish it.

When I returned I sat in the chair next to the teacher's desk. 'Why can't we look? Mr Claymore is a busy principal and shouldn't be required to undertake such a menial duty.'

'You make a good point, Micki. However, if there is an animal on the loose in this classroom we must put the welfare of the students first.'

'May I point out that Mulder is a guinea pig, not a wild boar.' I can do sarcasm too. Sometimes.

'I am aware of that. However, there are some students here who may get distressed if they come face to face with Mulder outside of his cage.'

'Her cage. I understand. As a compromise, may I offer my services to the search? I don't feel the need to participate in music if we are required to change rooms.'

She made a heavy sighing noise through her nose. 'I'll see what I can do.'

I nodded. 'We must trust no-one.'

She smiled. 'And deny everything?'

I was impressed. 'The truth is out there.'

'I have no doubt of that, Micki.'

The others went off behind the teacher. Like rats behind the Pied Piper. I mused about whether there was a Pied Piper equivalent for sci-fi guinea pigs. The Cigarette Smoking Man? I stayed behind and got ready to search. I went to the teacher's desk and pulled open the drawers. There were files, scissors (so that's where they were kept), those great felt tip pens that gave you such a precise line on your letters, rolls of sticky tape, highlighter pens, a torch, batteries, elastic bands, a pair of handcuffs (hello) and a battered copy of Mark Haddon's 'The curious incident of the dog in the night time'. But no Mulder.

'Micki, you're supposed to be in the music room with the others.' The teacher was standing so close to me, with her arms folded around her front, yet I didn't hear

her come in. I dug my fingers into my palms just to make sure I was still awake. I took a peek and saw the red crescents embedded there. I smiled up at the teacher.

‘I was looking for Mulder.’

‘I’d like you to go to the music room now.’ She put her hand on my back and I flinched. I don’t like that. The hands-on approach. I checked those crescents. They were still there. She walked me to the music room. The noise was infernal. Tambourines, triangles, Maracas. I sat for a while picking threads from the edge of the carpet. I did try to join in. I rocked back and forth in time to the racket but after a few minutes I snuck out. Back to the classroom.

This time I got to search the art boxes. There were plenty of places a small animal could get snug. There were fabrics, felts, cottons and wools, cotton wool. But no hidden guinea pig. And then the teacher found me. I was frogmarched out again.

*Micki has episodes of periodic refusal and oppositional defiance to authority.*

*There are strategies that can be deployed to ensure she cooperates. Social stories and role playing games are the obvious choices to make sure she has correct behaviours to model.*

I wasn’t interested in playing the stupid game of classroom ping pong. I wanted, no, I needed to find Mulder. Just like in the television series, the main characters are driven and determined, and once on a track must follow its path to the conclusion, despite the vast amount of quirky deviations that are thrown in their way.

I pretended to be distracted, picking the skin on the back of my hand, but it was just a ruse. I was hatching my plan. It was a good one. Not only would I find the

missing guinea pig but I would return it to a better life. A life outside of being a classroom mascot. A life where she could run free, feel the grass under her feet, feed her fat little face with fresh food. Yes. I would take her home with me.

But first I had to find her. And that meant escaping the gaze of the teacher.

'I need to go the bathroom.'

'You've been six times today, Micki.'

'Seven is an inherently lucky number.'

She put the pen down. 'Do you really need to go?'

I farted. Lucky I could always do that on cue. She screwed up her nose and nodded to the door. I darted down the corridor and slipped into the library where we hang our drawstring book bags. I grabbed mine and turned back to the door. It was then I saw it. The body in the library. Mulder's little furry corpse lying under a shelf at the end. When I picked her up she was stiff and cold. It was fascinating. Her eyes were wide but unseeing. The skin on her tiny feet was the palest pink. She felt empty. Truly like her soul had departed.

The door opened and of course the teacher came in. 'Micki! Put it down.' She was half-talking, half-screaming.

'Mulder is a she. Not an it.'

'Put Mulder down. Please.'

'But she's dead.'

'I can see that.'

'Somebody murdered her.'

'I don't think you can murder a guinea pig.'

'She's got a puncture mark in her neck.'

The teacher cringed when I showed her. 'Put her down, Micki. Please.'

I placed her as gently as I could on the table between us. 'I was going to take her home.'

'I know.'

'In my library bag.'

'Yes. Your parents are here.'

'They would have said yes.'

'Why did you kill her, Micki?' The teacher's eyes glistened.

'Kill Mulder? I would never do that.'

'One of your pencils is on the floor. Over there, where you found it.'

'Her. Found her.' I looked around. There was my Prussian Blue. 'It must have been Elinor. She stole my pencil.'

'Elinor is not capable of killing a small creature, Micki.'

'But she is a thief.' I could hear my own indignation. It was an interesting process because it started as an acid bubble in my guts that burned up my chest and throat and came out as a whine rather than a growl as you might expect.

'She is attracted to bright things. She's like a bower bird.' The teacher took my hands in hers. They were surprisingly soft and warm. Not furry like a guinea pig, but a pleasing, comforting texture.

I considered this. Elinor was neither in possession of a beak nor a plumage so I doubted the veracity of the claim. At the same time, I understood on some other level that the teacher was trying to persuade me that Elinor was not as intelligent as me. But did that not in turn infer that people who had little control over their emotions might react in impulsive ways. Such as murdering guinea pigs?

'So it's reasonable to assume that she might have been attracted to the animals because of their colouring, the bright orange and the tan brown against the white is a winning combination. The fascination of their markings might have overcome her. She might have taken a closer look to see if there was some sort of pattern to their markings, an order in the chaos of their fur, if you like. Patterns are not always random, you know. Patterns often present in nature for a definitive reason. There is a logic to their apparent lack of rhythm.'

I continued. 'She might have liked the guinea pigs fur because it is soft and cuddly and she might have taken it to pet and then it might have bitten her and she might have stabbed it with the Prussian Blue. Out of fear, or confusion.' I looked into the teacher's eyes. I found it difficult to hold my gaze there but once I saw her eyes were rounder, wetter, softer, it made me feel a little better.

'Is that what happened, Micki? Did you take Mulder to have a cuddle? Did it bite you?' She rubbed my hands, a rhythmic action that matched my body's own movements. I leant my head against her shoulder. Closed my eyes.

*The school has employed techniques to soothe Micki when she feels afraid or anxious. The use of sensory items such as fake fur throws and weighted blankets to temper her anxiety have proved successful in curbing her mood swings. If these techniques are put into practice quickly enough we can avoid a major meltdown.*

I felt what I presumed were memories sifting back into my mind. When the incident with Elinor and the pencil happened the teacher asked me to sit in the library. It was cool in the room and I was shivering. I asked if I could fetch a blanket from the classroom. The assistant walked me back and stood at the door whilst I picked my blanket. I always choose the black and white fleecy one. It was folded on a shelf under the guinea pig cages.

‘If you did kill the guinea pig Micki, you can tell me. It’s okay to be upset or angry. If you need to cry or yell that’s fine.’ She stroked my hair. My eyes were stinging then. There were confusing patterns slicing across my mind. Images. Feelings. All rolling into each other. I took my hands away and clutched the sides of my head. Holding it together. It helped.

The guinea pigs were nestled together and seemed content. I gathered the blanket towards me and looked over to the assistant. She was looking down the corridor so she didn’t see me pick up Mulder. The feel of her fur in my hand was surprising. She was warm. She was heavier than I imagined. She sniffed and her whiskers tickled me. I remember laughing. I hadn’t laughed in a while. It felt odd. The

assistant gave me a look and lowered her eyebrows so that she looked angry. I tucked Mulder into my blanket and went back to the library with the assistant. I knew the guinea pig wouldn't judge me, wouldn't ask me to look in her face or to complete dumb tasks. She could let me just be.

In the library I grabbed my bag, so that I could put Mulder in it and she'd be comfortable on the bus. I put her down on the floor whilst I laid soft cloths on the bottom of the bag and when I looked down she was gone. I wasn't worried at first. I knew I'd find her. But then Elinor came into the room. She wanted her library bag and was pointing to rows of bags hanging off the rack. The assistant helped her and that's when I spotted Mulder. And my Prussian Blue. Elinor was trying to put my pencil into her bag. I ran to her, swiped it from her hand and ran back to where Mulder was scurrying under the shelves.

I don't know at what point my parents sat down. They might have been there for a while. They were silent. 'It's okay Micki. You can have a break if you want.'

My mind didn't want to take a break.

I remember dropping my pencil when I picked Mulder up. Perhaps I squeezed her too hard. She squeaked a bit but Elinor's wailing covered up the noise. Mulder bit me. Her teeth sunk into my finger and I squealed then. I dropped her and grabbed my pencil at the same time. Mulder licked her front paws. I found that a bit insulting. She'd bitten *my* finger yet she was cleaning *her* paws. I licked the blood on my finger, still holding my pencil. It felt good to have it back in my clasp. I realised

Mulder was going to make a run for it again, so before she darted away I brought my hand down to grab her. I didn't realise it was the one still holding the pencil.

Mum drew me into her arms and rocked with me. My father sat with his hands resting in his lap. 'Do you feel better now, Micki?' He put a hand on my shoulder.

I didn't but I wasn't sure he needed to know that just then. I sat still while the adults fussed around. When the door opened I was surprised to see Elinor. She approached me with that lopsided grin that seemed permanently fixed to her face. In her hands she held Scully. She offered the guinea pig to me to stroke. I think I smiled.

It felt good to feel Scully's warm fur in my hands, so alive. Elinor laughed. She looked cute. As my father says, sometimes odd things really are beautiful.