

The Jigsaw Puzzle

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The sun. It's been one of the hottest days of the year, mid-July, but the sun is finally starting to descend behind the tree line. The laundry is clean. The dishes are clean. The kitchen and bathroom floors are mopped. Everything has been dusted. The shower curtain has been replaced with one that is fresh and free of mildew.

Vera takes the old shower curtain and wraps it around the large oak tree in the back yard, secures it with duct tape. This too will be a clean transition. They can wrap her up in it. No mess at all. She's a little woozy. That'll be gone soon. She points the rifle toward herself. But something is wrong. The trigger is too far away. She can't reach it.

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Ms. Rogers:

I was inspired by your personal story of surviving breast cancer. My husband Ray suffers from prostate cancer, and he was moved as well. We watch your news show every night at six before we eat dinner. I wondered if you would run a story about how to quit smoking. Ray and I have both been smoking cigarettes for over thirty years, and we've tried everything in the book. My first husband died of lung cancer, and that didn't even deter me! Can you imagine?

Thank you very much,

Mary Jane Grosnick

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“Your sister tried it again, this time with a gun.”

“A gun? Where the fuck did she get a gun?” Mary Jane is seething. She knows very well where the gun came from—it came from him, Vera's idiot husband Gene who is on the other end of the phone with her.

“It was one of the ones from the house.” He sounds to her even more clueless than she could have imagined.

“After all her suicide attempts, you still have guns in the house?”

“Luckily, I'd taken the cartridge out.”

“Cartridge? What kind of gun was it?”

“An M16A2, semiautomatic. Not much use really in keeping a gun like that around if it isn't loaded. By the time you need it, if it isn't loaded, doesn't do much good. But, thankfully, at this time, it wasn't loaded.”

Mary Jane hangs up. Then she remembers she forgot to ask what hospital Vera is in, so she calls Gene back.

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Vera is familiar now with the nurses who work on the psych ward, which ones are overly surly and which ones are too bubbly. There is no happy medium, no Goldilocks of the mental unit to make her feel comfortable without making her feel like a helpless child. Perhaps she is a helpless child. Her brain is broken. People without broken brains do not repeatedly try to kill themselves. She can't control herself, so she has to let someone else be in charge of her for a while, and though she knows that as a fact, her broken brain can't seem to really process it and she doesn't know what to do with herself. She sits at a card table and works at a jigsaw puzzle. She knows there will be pieces missing, but she doesn't even care. She finds that kind of symbolism tiresome.

The nurses who are overly surly tend to wear the tackiest, silliest scrubs, the ones with patterns of children's cartoon characters or smiley faces. Once she saw one where the smiley faces had head bandages, and she thought that was appropriate. The head nurse, apparently, didn't think it was appropriate because that nurse got scolded and never wore those scrubs to work again.

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Ms. Rogers:

Thanks so much for your special on how to stop smoking. As I mentioned in a previous letter, my first husband died of lung cancer, and my current husband Ray (I've mentioned him to you before) has prostate cancer. I didn't mention that a husband in between died from brain cancer, and when I was single I dated two men who had throat cancer. I guess you could say I'm a cancer groupie. Do you think there's something wrong with me? Lol.

Thank you very much,

Mary Jane Grosnick

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On the way to the hospital, Mary Jane sits in the back seat, her husband Ray in the passenger side front, Gene in the driver's seat. Gene says, "So y'all are both on the patch now? How's 'at going?"

She knows he's just trying to make conversation, but the question itself makes her want to smoke more than ever, makes her want to shove an entire pack of cigarettes in her mouth and light it aflame, and then she would like to light Gene aflame for good measure.

The patch has been playing tricks on her brain. For about three days, Mary Jane had been convinced she'd won a million dollars from a scratch off game at Taco Bell. Ray believed her when she came home and told him about it. Then she thought she had lost the ticket or French fry box or whatever it was with the prize on it, and then she realized a couple of days later it had all been a patch-induced hallucination. Fortunately they had decided to keep the whole thing under their shirts until the winnings were confirmed.

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Vera looks up from the jigsaw puzzle just in time to make eye contact with Gene as he approaches the nurses' station, her sister and brother-in-law in tow. She doesn't want to talk to them. One of the too bubbly nurses comes bounding over to the table. Before the nurse can make her overly bubbly announcement, Vera says she knows. Waves them over.

Hugs. Not tender ones. Shoulder pats. They see her as delicate now. There are four chairs around the card table so they all sit. They ask her what she's working on. Jigsaw puzzle. Duh. And don't ask what it's of. The box is right in front of you.

Mary Jane says, "What's it of?"

Vera pushes the box in her direction. It's flowers. Mental patients are supposed to like flowers she guesses. We find them calming.

She assures them that she feels okay and the staff is taking good care of her. That's all they want to know. Nothing is resolved. No sort of resolution is attempted. She knows they are thinking she is safe here and maybe she'll get better this time. Vera is just biding her time until they let her go home.

On the other hand, she hopes they do keep her here a while. It is quiet mostly, and it's very clean.

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Ms. Rogers,

I am shocked and incensed at the story I saw tonight when I got home about this new sales tax they want to start charging. For schools? Yeah, right. That money goes right in the pockets of you know who. My brother-in-law has a large gun collection. I have a mind to borrow one of those guns and tote it right down to the capital building.

Thank you very much,

Mary Jane Grosnick

P.S. I saw you coming out of the Publix this afternoon, and I didn't quite realize what I was doing at the time, but I sort of followed you to your neighborhood. Local news anchors must not get paid as much as I would think. Was that your daughter with you? She's lovely.

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Vera looks for those last couple of pieces of the jigsaw. They must be under the table somewhere. She gets down on her knees, combs through the gray-blue low pile with her fingers. Her hair falls down into her face. She can't see anything anyway. She gives up. An urge to just lie down there on the floor comes over her, but she resists. How can she be so exhausted when all she has done for three weeks is sleep, go to therapy, and work on this jigsaw puzzle?

When she returns to her plastic chair, Mary Jane says, "We're the only normal ones here, aren't we?"

Vera doesn't answer.