How to Tell if Your Loved One Belongs in the Booby Hatch

by Apryl Lee

It is well known around town that Ray's dad went crazy. Today, when asked, everyone will tell you that they knew all along he had a screw loose, told their wife, “That Mick Borkowski's gone bat-shit.” But when it was happening, no one paid it any mind. Even Ray will tell you today that going mental is not something you can easily recognize, even as it's happening in front of you.

But there are clues.

Ray was eleven, and family breakfasts were his first inkling that something was wrong. One morning, Mick sat giggling at a piece of toast, his butter knife poised.

“What's funny about toast?” Ray's mother Lenore asked with no reply from Mick other than a hearty sigh. “Ray, honey, do you think toast is funny?”

Ray said he wasn't sure as he watched his dad smile and close his eyes. Mick stayed like that at the table, knife in hand, eyes closed, chuckling as his family went about their day.

All week Mick chuckle-sighed, as if remembering something you couldn't possibly understand, at the office, at the UPS man, and at Misty Hansen's wedding ceremony, loudly enough that three women in lavender hats ticked at him like they were shooing a cat from their roses.

His laughter was vague and irritating.

Finally, “Dad? What are you laughing at?”

“Nothing.”

“Tell me.”

Sigh. “It's esoteric, son.”

“What's *esoteric*?”

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“If I explained it, it would loose all meaning.”

Ray will tell you that the next indication Mick had cracked was the staring, the defiant glare of a serial killer or a younger brother. At home, at work, at passersby, he'd lock eyes, and after over a week of this, Mick was confronted by two of his clients at the Acme Super Store. Mick was an accountant and kept the books in order for most of the local business owners.

He was approached in the bread aisle by the owners of Romano's Ristorante and Sweet Buns Bakery after both suffered particularly unproductive meetings in which Mick sat, pencil in hand, spread sheets before him, staring dead into the eyes of the person across from him for their entire hour. Both Ollie Romano and Chet Callahan squirmed, looked away, stared back, left their respective office, returned with coffee, and cussed. In the bread aisle, they cussed some more.

Ollie said, “I bounced three goddamn checks this week! What gives with the shenanigans, goddamnit?”

Chet asked, “You on goddamn dope again?” You'd think Chet of all people would have seen the signs, since the two of them had notoriously been known in their youth as a pair of jelly-brains and druggers. But, Chet was only joking and nothing more of Mick's behavior was mentioned beyond that.

“Knock it the goddamn hell off, Mick!” said Ollie, to which Ray chuckled, because he hadn't stopped the laughing thing. “Well, then, see you next month.”

But, the next month Mick would not keep those appointments. Mick would quit his job, announcing, “I can't keep going there every day.”

Lenore was spending nights in the bathroom, leaving only to microwave oatmeal for Ray's dinner. Ray was left alone with Mick staring at him. Ray played along, shoveling oatmeal into his mouth, staring back at his dad until his eyes dried up.

“Why are you staring at me?”

Mick shushed him. “If you'd shut-up, you'd know! Listen to what I'm saying,” he yelled and grabbed Ray so they were nose to nose, looking into each other's eyes. Mick kneaded into Ray's little arms and Ray tightened his gaze, eyes stinging like paper-cut slivers. Ray felt his father's breath, warm and moist. He blinked.

“I don't hear anything.”

“Then you never will,” his father said and went into the garage where he stayed for the next month building real, fake things.

That move, Ray will tell you, going into seclusion to engage in odd, possibly ritualistic activities, is the sure sign that your loved one or acquaintance has come undone.

Ray and his mother ate oatmeal in the bathroom, and Lenore explained how in college, Mick worked in the theatre scene shop. He learned a lot about construction, but not practical construction. “It was all for the show. Nothing he ever made was real.”

But Mick, in a lucid moment, explained to his son how he could build an aged, stone fireplace with nothing but particleboard, chicken wire, and Elmer's glue, and when that log was plugged in it glowed and picked up the flecks of orange and pink paint Mick had spattered inside for effect. And when the sound guy ran the crackle-pop soundtrack, “You could feel the warmth, and you smelled it burn, and you knew it was real.” As he told this to Ray, he stared at the ground and he only laughed at the end of his story, which, Ray thought, made sense.

Mick's long retreat into the garage began with the construction of a refrigerator, with working light and dry ice made from a refrigerator box. When Mick wasn't holed up in the garage, he was on the prowl, driving through town looking for free things, garbage, household discards, making a spectacle of himself.

In a few short weeks, he'd built three rooms in which he'd made a stove using an old car door, a paper-mache La-Z Boy, and a bed with packing peanuts wrapped in cheesecloth for the mattress. There was a wine bottle chandelier and a large window seat with a view of an apple tree made from twisted foam tubing and crumpled garbage

bags. Ray watched him, unnoticed, for hours, sawing, sanding, staining, caulking. When Mick was done with each new thing, he'd announce what it was.

“That's a television.” And it was, made from broken storage cabinetry and a travel agent's banner

People called Lenore to tell her Mick was picking through their recyclables, or that he'd taken a set of chairs from the curb that they were donating. Most people thought it annoying or amusing. Ray listened in on the other line, and never was there any concern in their voice, except for once when Mick's old boss called and asked Lenore to tell him everything would be all right.

That's around the time, Ray will tell you, that he and Lenore left.

Ray can remember sitting in the running car as his mother stood just inside the garage, peering through the window of his father's living room. “We Are the World” played on the radio. As they drove away, leaving most of their things behind, Lenore said, “You father has his secrets written on the walls. He says he feels better now, but we just can't be sure.”

Weeks later, Mick was found wandering naked in Meadow Plaza. He was waiting for the hardware store to open, needed a bucket of white paint to clean up the walls.

The way it's remembered around town, the scene was out of a movie. It was raining. People gathered, keeping their distance, some brought coffee, cameras. Once or twice, someone would shout, “Mick, you doing all right there?” despite the fact that he was clearly nude and muttering about white walls. When the police arrived, Mick threw his hands in the air.

“I surrender! I'm done. I can't.” The cops moved in, covering him gently in a blanket and walked him to the cruiser. He apparently chuckled and stared at the crowed, making eye contact with each of them.

That's when people started saying they knew he'd lost his marbles. “Ever since I caught him in my shed stealing half-used pieces of sandpaper! Asked him, ‘Wouldn't you like a whole new piece?' Said he needed enough just to convince me it was smooth.”

“Mad as a hatter! I knew when he wouldn't stop staring at me at the deli, and then told me it'd be lot easier if I could just hear what he was saying.”

“His weird laugh! Like he was remembering something that he even couldn't believe himself. Crazy as a fish on a bike.”

That's what they all say, still.

Mick voluntarily checked himself into the booby hatch, a nice, relaxing place, and Ray and Lenore returned home. The morning they were set to dismantle Mick's garage home, Ray woke early.

He pushed over the television. The frame bent; the banner ripped. Everything was flimsy and fake, made of just the right materials, adorned with just the right embellishment to fool someone into believing what they wanted to believe, that the refrigerator was a refrigerator, the television was a television, that the apple tree was alive and growing apples, just enough to suspend disbelief. Mick's house was nothing more than theatrics.

Ray sat in the paper-mache chair expecting it to cave, but it was rigid, sturdy, real. Sunlight opened, lighting the chandelier, scattering shards of green light. Ray noticed the walls, Mick's secrets, written in blue ballpoint pen all over the cardboard walls of his house, barely noticeable without the sunlight.

Ray will tell you all this if you ask him about his father, and he will end his story with a lesson about letting your truth come out, because the writing on wall is never pretty. He will smile when he tells you this. I suspect because he fancies himself quite clever for coming up with it. The story will end there for you. You might wonder about some things in the story, like what the owner of Sweet Buns was doing buying bread at the supermarket, or why no one called the cops when Mick started stealing, or what happened to Lenore, but those things don't matter. And don't bother asking the big question. Ray won't ever say what the secrets on the wall were, because that's not his point in telling you all this.

Of course, if you're from around here, you know what was written on the walls of the house that Mick built. His secret confession that for ten years he had been profoundly in love with his boss, that

monthly business trips were spent showering and lying warm and wet beside Stephen, that the guilt was rotting him inside and starting to pour out of him in fits of laughter, that he'd been trying to tell them, anyone, telepathically, but how no one would listen. All this written in pen on cardboard, again and again, some of it printed, some in all caps, some scrawled with hard-dotted *i's* and passionately underscored phrases that ripped open the cardboard.

But, Ray won't tell you this. Ray just wants you to know how to recognize the signs of bat-shit crazy. When Ray told me, however, it was for a different reason, and had a different ending. Ray told me the warning signs of totally-fucking-nuts so that he could comfortably reveal that since the summer. He had been sleeping with some girl that sells sunglasses.

He says she gives him something I can't, something he needs, and he hopes it's okay.

I say, “Just until the wedding.”

He says, “I can't make that promise.”

I say, I need you to try, but I don't think he hears me.