

# She Don't Understand Nothing

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BABA KNOWS ALL THE WAY DOWN TO HER *SPARKLY BARBIE* VARNISHED TOENAILS—which she wiggles every time the sun passes over them—that this is not the way to the Liquorice Store, even though her Mommy said that's where they were going. Baba watches suspiciously out the window as the clapboard houses of Fort St. John transform to bush. Mommy holds the steering wheel tightly with her left hand and has twisted her other arm back through the middle of the two front seats, holding onto Baba's foot. Mommy digs her thumb under the arch, between the plush of the footpad and the hardness of Baba's plastic purple jelly sandal. It tickles, and when the tickly feeling reaches the roof of her mouth, Baba kicks her foot and tells Mommy to stop. Mommy curls her thumb back and removes it, but doesn't let go of the foot.

They are on one of the old logging roads. They only ever use these tree-hooded, snaking roads for two reasons: either they are going to Prince George to visit Gramps, who, Baba thinks, is mostly blind (he has a big magnifying window-thingy in front of his TV and reads books with ginormous letters), or they are going to sleep in their tent at the lake. Baba weighs these two options. Sleeping by the lake is good because it means s'mores, swimming, and the smell of wood smoke in your hair in the morning. But going to Prince George has its benefits, too, like blue slushies topped with soft vanilla ice cream from the Mr. PG store, or chasing Gramps' old collie, Muffin, up and down the street, and up and down again, and laughing at poor Muffin when she coughs and sputters. "Stupid hag," is what Gramps says, but then he grabs Muffin by the ears and rubs her sausage body till her tongue hangs out.

Both these places—the lake and, especially, Gramps' back porch with cups of coffee—mean that Mommy will be pretty much happy.

The motion of the car lulls Baba, and the trees whizzing past have turned into one tree, with neither beginning nor end, under a sky equally boundless. The same endlessness in which, the summer before, on her fifth birthday, Baba watched her number-five balloon dance until it became too small to see. Somehow the ribbon had slipped from her wrist, and the shiny, red five bobbed up, up, up, and up. She had been sadder for the balloon than for herself, so alone up there it was. "It's just going back to the store," Gramps told her, while he wiped snot from under her nose. "We'll head on over there tomorrow and it will

be waiting for you." It was there, too, or at least another number-five balloon was. She pretended, for Gramps, and hugged the balloon to her small body.

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"BABA, HONEY, REACH INTO MOMMY'S BAG AND GET HER MEDICINE." Mommy says this with an urgent squeeze of the foot. Baba leans over, but can't reach Mommy's heavy, shapeless denim bag. She sits back up, undoes her seatbelt, and reaches down again. Playing along (always playing along), Baba heaves out the half-empty forty-ouncer of vodka and awkwardly passes it through the front seats. She props it in the crook of Mommy's legs.

"Good. Now sit back and do up your seatbelt again, like a good Baba."

Baba does as she is told and then closes her eyes, hearing the *shuck* of the metal cap spinning off the glass spout of the bottle, knowing not to ask Mommy why they aren't going to the Liquorice Store.

Fresh air hits Baba's face and she opens her eyes just as Mommy tosses the black bottle cap out the window. Baba twists around to see the cap bounce a few times on the dirt road, then careen off into the ditch. She feels lonely for it. She tries not to lose the spot where it left the road, but then Mommy turns the car onto a small, wild trail. A line of tall grasses and weeds runs down the middle, slapping the front and bottom of the car like fingers. Along the trail, spindly pines reach high, like they're doing a wake-up stretch, communing with the hot breeze. Bears live in there, thinks Baba. She disregards a rule she knows well and blurts: "This is not the way to the Liquorice Store. Where is this the way to?"

Steely eye contact is made via the rear-view mirror. Mommy stops the car with enough force that Baba has to brace herself against the back of the driver's seat. Mommy presses her lips to the spout of her bottle and tips it back.

"What does Mommy say about question?" asks Mommy, after swallowing.

"Don't ask them."

"So why did Baba ask a question?"

"Because we've been driving forever. And Baba only thought we were going for a little drive."

"What happens when Baba asks stupid questions?"

"A good slap."

Mommy sighs and turns clumsily around onto her knees, swearing. She reaches over the back of her seat, but instead of slapping Baba across the top of her head (and Baba is ready for it: eyes squeezed tightly shut, teeth clenched, arms wrapped around her tiny, seized-up middle, toes curled), Mommy grabs her chin

and moves Baba's head back so that when Baba slowly opens her eyes she is looking right at Mommy.

"Why is Baba crying?" asks Mommy.

Baba shrugs; hardens her trembling lip.

Mommy puts her hands on Baba's shoulders. Their clammy heat goes through Baba's thin T-shirt. "You know how much I love you."

"Yes, I know."

"You got to trust me and not ask questions about where we're going or what this is or what that is. Does Baba believe Mommy?"

Baba can't push her voice past the ball in her throat. She chews on the walls of her mouth until she can swallow the ball. "Baba believes Mommy."

"Does Baba trust Mommy?"

"Yes."

"Does Baba love Mommy?"

"Yes."

"Good." Mommy takes her hands away, leaving a vestige of her hand on each shoulder—which instantly becomes cold—and shuffles around again. She takes a big swig of her bottle, and before turning the key, opens the window and spits. After several minutes, the car is labouring down a road that is barely a road. It threatens to thin out to nothing but sagebrush, wild rose, and weed. Baba's tongue sticks to the top of her mouth like her legs are sticking to the seat. The sun comes in through the thin canopy of pine tree crowns and dapples everything.

Mommy stops the car again and reaches for the latch to open the glove compartment. She misses it on the first try, and scratches the air a few times until making contact. She opens it with scuttling fingers and rifles through the detritus. All Baba can see are Mommy's shoulder and arm, and her long brown hair (like a horse's tail, and so soft to braid) falling over her arm. The fingers find and latch onto a real medicine bottle—small, tea-coloured, and full of tea-coloured pills—and then the arm pulls back. Baba sinks down in her seat until her chin is resting on her chest and the swallows have to get around a funny corner in her throat. Her seatbelt strap rubs on her nose and she moves her head from side to side because she likes the feeling of the stiff fabric scratching her nose; the way it makes her top lip go numb. She's hungry. Mommy soon tosses the empty tea-coloured bottle onto the back seat and Baba flicks it onto the floor.

The car creeps along now, and Mommy has her arm through the seats again, squeezing Baba's knee. *Going to squeeze it right off*, thinks Baba, but doesn't complain because Mommy has taken all those pills and is going to barf like she

did the last time. So Baba stays still, with her hands folded in her lap, and watches the trees as the car slowly moves forward, swerving off and back onto the trail again but not in a scary way because, by now, Baba could run as fast as the car is moving. Muffin could run as fast as the car is moving.

They come to the end of the trail, where they face trees in every direction, like bars. Baba wonders how a road can end, just like that, and why it was ever started if it doesn't actually go anywhere. Mommy turns off the engine. Weakly, she pulls Baba's knee, so Baba undoes her seatbelt, softly catapults herself between the two front seats, then settles into the passenger's side. Mommy's arms hang limp. Her head is on the steering wheel and she turns it slowly to look at Baba. Her eyes close and open, slowly and heavily, like garage doors. She lifts herself by arching her back, and slugs her weight into the seat again. She slings her right arm over the stick shift so that her hand, curled slightly, rests on Baba's fleshy thigh. Ten of the little pills lie in her palm. Out of the bottle, they're blue.

"For you," says Mommy. "Won't hurt."

Baba looks up at Mommy, whose eyes are closed again, and back at her hand, fingers frozen in a half-curl, like a spider, dead on its back. *Silly Mommy*, she thinks. Baba takes pills only after they have been smashed up between two spoons, with strawberry jam. Baba tenderly picks the pills out of Mommy's palm and lays them out in lines on her thighs, five on each thigh, starting at her knees and up. Baba doesn't want to barf; she has barfed before and remembers what it's like.

Baba puts one pill in her mouth and tries to swallow. It won't go. The chalky medicine taste coats the back of her tongue and she spits the pill out, then licks her arm to get the taste off. Mommy's eyes are still shut, so Baba picks the remaining pills off her legs and hides them under the floor mat. She takes a deep breath, with her shoulders up to her ears, and waits. Rolls down the window. The woods smell nice—crude and piney, mushroomy—but within seconds mosquitoes and black flies surround her. She rolls up the window and squashes mosquitoes against the glass.

"Lap," croaks Mommy.

Baba crawls onto Mommy's lap and manoeuvres her arms into a hug. The arms fall, and Baba lifts them again, holding Mommy's hands together over her own belly. She nestles her head into Mommy's neck so that they are both facing the front window, identical profiles.

"Took them all, baby?"

Baba nods her head up and down, so that her hair rubs on Mommy's neck and chin.

"Good."

"I'm hungry, Mommy."

"Eat your candy."

"There is no candy."

It's too hot to be sitting like this. Baba wishes Mommy would just get it over with and barf so they can go. Mommy's breathing is calm, and it feels nice to be moved up and down, like on the floating raft at the lake, in the sun, toes and tummy and cheek pressed hotly against the wet, fragrant boards, one hand in the lapping water. The sound the water makes when it slaps underneath the raft is *guloonk, guloonk*. Baba tries to match her own breathing with the rhythm of Mommy's, but hers is too drawn out, with long pauses. So Baba listens to the noise of the woods. There seem to be zillions of different birds, and bugs, and other scratching, creaking things.

Mommy stops breathing a few hours into dusk. The cessation wakes Baba. Mommy's arms fell away long ago, and Baba's head is against the window, her neck tight. She climbs back over to the passenger seat so she can look at Mommy properly. Mommy lies with her head back, mouth open, her face sunken, with bluish skin stretched over the bones. Baba puts her hand on Mommy's cheek, then pulls away as if it were burning. But it's cold, and the skin feels like raw chicken. She yanks Mommy's arm, digs her fingernails into it, and yanks and yanks. She puts both her hands flat on Mommy's chest and pushes. Mommy's body rolls back and forth. Everything is cold; alarming to touch. Baba pulls hard on Mommy's earlobe and screams into it, then sits back in her seat, pissed off.

She waits, concentrating on the zing of cicadas. She thinks about bears—how close and how many—then shakes Mommy again and screams into her ear. Mommy's head only slumps from side to side. Her eyes are open, the pupils dilated and empty, so Baba pushes Mommy's head to look the other way. She punches her arm hard, and kicks the gear box, hurting her toes—she does this until she can't anymore—and tightens herself into a ball, having no idea where else to put the panic.

Some time later she feels hungry again, and scrambles into the back, emptying Mommy's bag onto the seat. Junk falls like dandruff. The only consumable things are a warm can of Coke and a few pieces of gum from various packages. Baba chews the gum and guzzles the Coke. Her teeth feel fuzzy and she has to pee, but she imagines bears out there, slowly pawing over the ground.

It's too dark outside to see anything. Her bladder is heavy. She opens the door, slowly, and sticks one foot out, then feels the mosquitoes bouncing off her face and hears them in her ears. They're on her mouth. She pulls the door shut again

and takes off her shorts and underwear, squats down into the foot space and pees all over her purple jelly sandals. Now there are mosquitoes in the car, dozens of them. *And poor Mommy*, she thinks, *too sick to swat them away*. The mosquitoes, fat in the dense heat of the car, bounce languidly against the seats and ceiling and windows. Baba shoos them away from Mommy and claps dead as many as she can. More come, as if killing only multiplies them. Her energy is low. Hunger and thirst aren't unfamiliar; she's suffered these afflictions on those occasions when Mommy didn't come home, and knows how to swallow them away. So Baba curls into a tight ball, and spies the pines through the rear-view mirror. They are a line of bony fingers, regal, like praying mantises.

These are the animals she knows to be in the forest (perhaps hidden in those pines, trying to figure out how to get inside the car): Bears. Foxes. Cougars. Raccoons. Bobcats. Badgers. Coyotes. Moose. Deer.

Quite sure there are no lions.

And then there is the Bogeyman. Baba is dubious about this one, however. His invocation tends to occur conveniently, at times of conflict, like when Mommy wants Baba to leave her the hell alone with some man. Baba doesn't entirely believe in the Bogeyman, and yet she has an idea of what He looks like: tall and square and grey, features smudged, skin shaggy, hands carved from wooden blocks. She would never say out loud that she doesn't believe, for fear of pissing off both Him and Mommy. He could be out there now, cracking his knuckles and weaving slowly through the trees, breathing heavily with his face pointed toward the car, where Baba lies in the foetal position.

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SLEEP IS A BEEHIVE. It's full of holes and noise and miniscule, busy legs. The night draws out tediously to the longest wait Baba has ever experienced. She sits up at dawn. With the morning pale, Mommy's new colour is startling. She's turned from a lovely golden-brown, to something like cream that's gone off. And it's like she's lost her blood, too. There's no depth to the colour; it's flat and unchanging. Baba yells, "Wake up, Mommy," into her ear a few times, with little expectation. She runs a dry tongue over her cobbled lips.

What finally gets Baba out of the car is hunger. It doesn't help that the car is stifling and beginning to smell like the kitchen when Mommy forgets to do the garbage.

The morning air feels lovely and cold on the backs of her knees, and there are no mosquitoes. She leans against the side of the car and looks around. The trees lower to the ground—the aspen and birch, and the younger, bushy pines—bounce

with chickadees, a blackbird, warblers, and swallows. A jay flutters and jerks on the pinnacle of some dead branch. Somewhere deeper into the trees, the woodpecker's peck echoes and cicadas whine like lawnmowers.

Birds are safe. She knows that much, and she also knows that if she walks up the trail, she will likely find wild strawberries. It's too early for blueberries and blackberries, but the week before, she and Mommy were walking through the unused lot behind the 7-Eleven (Baba remembers the fat greaseball who'd called out a sex thing from his passing truck, and Mommy pretending she didn't care) and bunches of strawberries grew in the tough grass there.

About twenty meters from the car, Baba turns around and panics because at first she can't see the car, but then realizes she's walked in a bit of an arc and most of the tan-coloured car is either hidden by brush or camouflaged. Baba creeps low down, wary of treading on strawberries or not seeing them. Every creak from the woods is a bear, not a bear, could be a bear. Powder-pink wild roses grow everywhere, and the whole world smells of them. Bluebells hang their heads as if in mourning. She keeps to the trail, focussed on anything red, and is fooled by low-growing clover, the dropped and rotting leaves of fireweed. She trips, landing one hand in a cluster of bull thistle, yelps furiously and bites her lip. Doesn't bother crying.

She comes to a culvert and jumps down into the ditch, squatting to inspect the muddy soil under the culvert. Very wet. And then to the right, in the bush, she hears water trickling. She peers into the trees toward that sound; the sun is high and lights the way at least ten or fifteen meters deep into the trees, but beyond that the green glow turns murky and then black, and living things creak and *tut-tutch*. Baba leans on her haunches and listens. Wishes the birds would shut the hell up just for one minute so she could hear whether or not there is a bear. She stares at a dark mound in the shady distance for nearly five minutes, waiting for it to move. It doesn't, so she gets up and picks her way into the murk, looking back to the trail after every step. The mound turns out to be the bottom end of an upturned tree, roots exposed and snaky, and caked in tufts of moss, Witch's Hair, and earth. Baba finds the water source with her feet, a small brook nearly hidden by moss, funnelling through rocks. She moves a big rock to make a space large enough for her hands to scoop; she grabs at the water and scrapes her knuckles on the rock. The water is cool and tastes of minerals.

Back at the trail, she spends another half-hour not being able to find strawberries, retracing her steps so she doesn't actually go very far from the car. She picks flowers. She gives up when it gets too hot and the mosquitoes come back.

When Baba gets back to the car, she puts the strangled fist of wild roses,

dandelions, and clover on the passenger seat. She reaches over the seat and tries to lift Mommy's arm but it won't bend. It's like a stuck hinge. Baba can smell shit and piss, and there's a brown and black wet stain between Mommy's legs, on her jeans and on the seat. Baba leans with her knees against the bottom of the doorframe, with her palms flat on the seat, and bites her lower lip, and bites and bites. Instead of crying, she bites.

For the rest of the day she sits—swatting, swatting, itching, slapping—chews on pieces of grass, and pops the fluffy heads off dandelions, chanting, "Mommy had a baby and her head popped off." The bugs make her feel like she's inside the snowy channel on the television, but she stays away from the car until they get even worse at dusk. Inside the car, curled against the backseat, she breathes shallowly out of her mouth. She wards off the Bogeyman. The flesh around her eyes, behind her ears, and on her ankles has become a battleground of tiny, swollen mounds and rivulets of blood. That night, the only thing to distract this hungry, bloody girl from the dread of the wood around the car is the smell within it.

The next day she finds fiddleheads—dozens of them—growing near the place where she gets water. The baby fern shoots never appealed to her whenever Gramps picked pocketfuls of them before, but today they are heaven, and suddenly she sees them everywhere. She takes her shorts off, ties the legs together into a knot, and fills this new sack.

It occurs to her that she might be stuck here for good. She knows that Gramps won't be able to find her because he's blind. Anyway, he's a grownup, and grownups are simultaneously capable of the most hurtful and wonderful things. If she's going to get home, she'll have to get there on her own.

It's hot again today. Even though the trees provide shade, they also insulate; the mosquitoes seem heavier, the sounds tubular, the air wetter. She is sitting on a rock, out of sight of the car, when she feels something trickle from her armpit and fall. It happens again, and either stings or chills, it's hard to tell. She feels her armpit and finds it wet. She reaches around her back, under her T-shirt, and then holds her sweat-soaked hand in front of her face. She reacts to this in the same way she'll react in the future to her first pubic hair: with disgust and satisfaction.

On the third night, Baba feels restless for the first time. She looks like she's been vacuum packed. Her eyes are swollen like a boxer's from the black-fly bites and her legs are even more ribboned with blood from where she's scratched off scabs. She's hungry again. The air feels cool, and for the first time since coming here, she considers the stars. Being as young as she is, she marvels about how

far away they are or how many, or why. Tonight she will sleep under the car, because there is no breathable air inside it.

Months ago, Baba found a half-eaten cat in the backyard. Its head was missing and so were its guts. She could see the ribs. "Must have been a fox," Mommy had said. "Poor little kitty. We'll bury it." And they nearly accomplished this. They dug a hole and Mommy put a flat stone at its head. She went inside to get a candle and brought it out and stuck it in the ground. She went back in to get matches and when she didn't come back after a few minutes, Baba went in to find her. Mommy was sitting on the floor, up against the wall, legs splayed in front of her. She was looking at nothing and her face was wet with tears. Baba knew that the best thing to do was to go up to her room. After closing her bedroom door quietly, she sat on the floor and brushed Barbie's hair.

Mommy, with the face Baba knows and the long brown hair (so soft to braid), who kisses her hard and warm in the same places she slaps her. At last, she can't feel it anymore. Baba decides that tomorrow, she'll walk home.

Soft wind in the pines and a grey sky bring the morning. Baba looks through the passenger-side window, so all she can see is Mommy's hair. Soft and long. Maybe Mommy will be waiting for her when she gets home, fresh and new. And maybe she won't. She tells herself that the flowers will keep Mommy company, and goes.

Baba walks along the trail until she reaches the logging road. Directionless, she arbitrarily turns right and walks until, in her head, she's lying on the wooden raft, listening to the *guloonk, guloonk*. The Bogeyman treads in the woods alongside her, followed closely by a lumbering, stumbling bear. They watch her carefully and smile at each other. They can smell her. There isn't enough room in her for fear, so they can follow her as much as they like. Rain drizzles throughout the day, smelling lovely and keeping the bugs away. The jelly sandals rip into Baba's feet so she takes them off, and stops in the muddy ditches of the road to squelch her toes. Hunger and monotony slowly begin to yield to a sense of detachment. She has to stop and sit after every twenty minutes, and each time she gets cold.

At six o'clock the sun comes out, and with it a red pick-up truck rounds the bend in front of Baba. The first thing that occurs to her is how red it is, like a wet lollipop, with the coal-grey sky in the background, and the sun shining from behind her. It slows down, and she assumes it must be Gramps, forgetting that he's too blind to drive. Two strange men jump out of either side of the cab and come toward her very quickly. Not Gramps, not even close. The looks on their faces scare her and she turns to run; her feet move quickly but they aren't

touching the road anymore, and a set of strong arms hold her. She takes a mouthful of the hairy, thick skin and bites. A warm hand firmly takes her forehead and pulls her head back, and the man is shushing in her ear, trying to turn her around.

"She looks feral," the man who holds her says to the other. The other isn't a man at all, but a teenager, one she recognizes from her street. He turns her around and squints into her face; he's breathing excitedly and she can feel his heart beating against her whole body. He sits down on the road, making a chair for her out of his lap, and holds her. "Are you okay, Isabel?"

Baba tries to open her swollen eyes wider so she can see him better; tries to put her breathing in sync with his. "Only Gramps calls me that," she accuses, her voice cracking through a membrane that's grown over her throat.

"Your Gramps is out looking for you and your mom. He's got us out looking, too. A whole bunch of people."

"Mommy's back in the car. In the middle of the woods back there."

The man looks at the boy, and the boy stuffs his hands into his pockets and looks away. The man puts Baba in the back of the truck and gives her the second half of his sandwich. He drives to the road that he knows is not really a road, and continues to the end of that until he finds Mommy's car. He gets out and strides over to it, then puts his hand over his mouth, bending, as if someone's kicked him in the stomach. He stands and looks at the trees for a few minutes, then looks at the ground, then frowns and shakes his head as if he is trying to figure out some problem. When he gets back in the truck, he looks at Baba with a face all angled inward.

"You've been with her this whole time?"

Baba nods yes.

He throws his arm over the back of his seat and reverses the truck until he can turn it around.

The boy opens his window and sticks his head out, and then brings it back in and closes the window. He speaks while still looking out. "Guess The Fort will be needing a new hooker."

The man puts his eyebrows together, jerks his head toward the back of the car and shushes his son. "Don't say things like that with the little girl in the back."

The boy snorts. "She don't understand nothing," he says.