

Belinda Polanski

By Janet Miller

At recess I run out before the other kids to claim the best swing. I square myself on the seat, grab hold of the chains, bend my head forward and twist around and around until the tips of my shoes barely touch the gravel. Lift both my feet and un-twirl, my brains are dizzy and the playground sways in front of my eyes. The swaying I like but not the way my stomach wobbles. I swallow and breath through my mouth. Hold myself still for a minute. My sister says she'll laugh if one of these days I throw up on my shoes.

Now Belinda Polanski is there beside me at the swings. She says, "I'll pump. Let me. Let me." I shrug like I could care less and let her. Every time, I try and fail, I try not to look up at her where she stands, above me, one dingy canvas shoe on each side of me stuck through the D rings of the swing. I sit on the curved strap of red rubber, hands still clenched on the chains and face forward. The view beyond her thin calves the school field, the backside of a smelly barn at the end of the field.

Belinda`s enthused pumping takes us higher and higher. No one else in our two room Upper Valley School can do this. She is a scrawny Super Girl, very brave and I am a little bit brave because of her. Knees bent, straightened, bent, straightened and at the highest that we can possibly fly back and forth through the air, when gravity gives me that sickening, thrilling lurch at the top of each arc, she locks her knees. I look up.

Next time I won't let her pump me. I'll walk away from her greasy hair, her eagerness, her despair. I don't want to be friendly with her. My mother says, "Those poor little things. What chance do they have." She means Belinda and her passel of little sisters. There's a brother who

goes to the high school down the valley. My mother thinks that I am always kind to everyone, like she is. I am not.

The people in this valley where I live, many related to my family, own their farms. Sometimes the Dads work at something else too, drive the snow plow, deliver the mail, fix machines. Mom makes down Grandma's winter coats for me, with satiny linings and covered buttons that slide into bound button holes. They still smell like Grandma's house even after a year zipped in plastic with moth balls in the pockets. My sister has to wait until I grow out of a coat before she gets to wear it. "Sets your teeth on edge, doesn't it?" Dad says to her, teasing, "But in all likelihood, you'll survive." Which makes her stomp out of the room.

"Don't you look a picture," Mom says when I model the coat for her and she gets a chance to admire her handiwork. Shoes we get new from Woodward's Department Store in Vancouver when we visit there in the summer. Winter boots and gumboots we buy at MacPhail's Dry Goods in Mount Elson.

In the upstairs room I share with my sister, I lie on the floor and put my ear to the air vent. This is a thing to do only when my sister is somewhere else. It doesn't work if the noisy furnace fan turns on in the basement. I can hear what my mother and Auntie Rose are saying as they drink their tea at the kitchen table right below me. My face gets hot from the warm air and sometimes the poky crank in the middle of the vent that open and close the slats push into my face but it's worth it – because of what I hear them say. This time my Aunt talks about her daughter who is older than me. "Shellie has started already. I was hoping ... well. I wasn't expecting it to happen so soon."

Started? Started what? gets glued to my brain.

“Oh dear,” says my Mother. She sighs like she does when she’s out of sorts. “I guess I’ve got *that* to look forward to with my girls.” The way she says it I can tell she means the opposite.

The next time I see Shellie, I follow her around, looking for a difference, but she is the same. And it annoys her to be followed so she snaps at me, “Grab a brain, you little twerp.” I walk off in the other direction, stop and turn. I still keep an eye on her. She’s grouchy, that hasn’t changed.

Next year I will go to Grade Seven at Broad Hill Elementary School even further down the valley from the high school and past the village. I am only 10, a December baby and so the youngest in my class. And the smartest except for the problem I have with the arithmetic flash cards. There’s a girl, Debbie, who’s a year below me already doing our Grade Six work, but she doesn’t count because she’s blond. Very pretty. Not in my grade. And I don’t like her.

The Polanski kids started at our Shannon Meadows Elementary School in October after we’d already begun the school year. They have a car but didn’t bring furniture and they moved into an old house where someone’s grandparents used to live. Belinda says her Dad is a caretaker.

“Nothing on that property to care for,” says Dad. “No livestock. No crops. More like squatters, I’d say.”

“Now. Now,” Mom tuts. She thinks everyone should speak nicely about everyone. “They’ll get some chickens, surely, and have a garden next year.” Mom spends the summer canning and we butcher in the fall. “Lord knows what they eat now. Goodness me. I wonder if the church”

But the Polanskis are gone before school lets out at the end of June.

Belinda brings a cloth bag, not a real lunch kit with a picture of Wonder Woman like mine. She stashes the ratty bag in the cloakroom in the morning. Her sisters gather around her in some far corner of the playground at lunchtime and they haul out whatever is in there. I want to find out what's in that bag but don't dare try because my sister tells me I am not a very good sneak and I'd get caught for sure. She knows these things about me.

Belinda has red hair and she's taller than me because she's twelve. She always wears a skirt and the same pale pink sweater that doesn't have all its buttons and looks stretched or maybe it's just too big for her. Her mother was wearing that sweater the day she came to the school to say all her girls were sick with colds. Her nose was red and she walked back down the road, I know because I watched her.

I never tell Belinda my middle name. I don't want her to think there is any connection between us. Anyway it is totally different from hers. Mine is Linda – and it means lovely in some other language. Belinda probably doesn't mean anything.

When Belinda pumps my swing and I look up above me I see her bare legs all the way to their tops. A strip of light coloured underpants right above my eyes. There between her legs a dark stain, red maybe, almost black.

Always the same underpants. Always the same stain. Every time I let her pump.