



# Full

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ILLUSTRATION BY TOM BARWICK

# Full

Ivo has grown cold. Ivo has begun to close down.

In the driveway, in the car, ten-year old Ivo, so pale, so sickly pale, beneath a coronet of thin copper hair, is wearing his bones like clothes. Ivo's full lips, slightly grey and chapped, are peeling as if holding a chrysalis that is longing to emerge. The full fleshiness of this once-beautiful boy has sunk into his bones and has jumped his skin.

Can a ten-year-old boy be a faded beauty? An anorexic?

Francesca is forty. Her husband Virgil is thirty-eight. Francesca yearns for the youth that has just left her (with a blink it was gone). She yearns for another baby, a tidy house, a yard with chickens and fresh creamy-brown eggs, another dog, to be able to identify birds, a new bicycle, more time with Ivo, less time with Ivo. Virgil yearns for her to stop yearning.

Ivo is splitting away from Francesca. Ivo and Francesca are falling apart from each other. They are becoming two separate halves. Cool drafts, even cold winds, are blowing right through their once snug home. No matter how much psychic furniture Francesca burns, the house can no longer be kept warm.

The evening primroses in their garden have not yet popped. And yet, they have reached a point of crisis.

Francesca is driving. Ivo and his seven-month old baby brother Felix are in the back seat. Ivo is staring out the window, quietly begging to go home. Felix is asleep in his thick, Aran cardigan, the colour of cream. Their eight-year old brother Henry is at school. Virgil is at work. He is a teacher. Today, he really had to teach. And Francesca's mind is elsewhere. Worrying is eating her up.

Ivo has shut his lips to food.

Ivo fills up on nothing more than nibbles.

The birth of his little brother has given Ivo the strength to not eat.

Family friends, Lottie Mae and Hollin, childless but longing for children, will pick up Henry at the elementary school today, will take him to the State Fair and will let him choose to eat any of those sweet, salty, greasy foods he loves: roasted corn on the cob dipped in butter,

stuck on a stick, hull pulled back and down like a hula skirt; cotton candy in the palest blues and pinks; candied apples cooked in red-lacquer sugar, brighter than cinnamon hearts; stringy pork, soaked in barbecue sauce and served with coleslaw on a very white bun; funnel cakes; soft pretzels; corn dogs; Belgian waffles; hamburgers; French fries; foot-long hot dogs; root beer floats; elephant ears – 'Every ear made fresh!'; chilli; fried shrimp; fried catfish; fried chicken; cornbread.

All things Ivo will not eat.

Francesca is on her way to the Paediatric-psychiatric hospital with its shiny linoleum, fluorescent lights and sterile smells that do not mask the odour of death. She does not know when she will be coming home. Tomorrow? In a week? Never?

She will not leave Ivo.

She cannot leave Ivo.

But things have gone too far.

Ivo is quiet, like his father. Quiet like a feather.

Virgil is a quiet and strong father.

Ivo is a quiet and strong child.

Ivo speaks to Francesca more than he speaks to Virgil, more than he speaks to anyone else.

By not eating, Ivo is shutting his father out.

By not eating, Ivo is drawing his mother in.

Francesca's closeness with Ivo is a source of pain endured by Virgil. It stings Virgil to be left out. It feels like the lasting pain from the bite of that horrible stinging caterpillar that had struck Virgil in the garden just last summer. The ferocious caterpillar sunk its teeth into Virgil (although, technically, a stinging caterpillar does not use teeth or even a stinger. It is not an attack; it is much more sinister than that. It stings by mere casual contact, a sheer brush with its poisonous, hair-like nettling).

Ivo prefers not to talk.

Ivo prefers not to eat.

'Ivo, would you like a little breakfast?' Francesca, in the morning, gently pleads.

'No, thank you,' Ivo responds.

'Ivo, would you like some milk to drink with your peanut butter sandwich?'

'No thanks,' Ivo says.

‘Some apple juice?’

‘No thanks. I’m fine.’

Francesca continually asks, ‘Aren’t you thirsty?’ (Ivo has switched from milk, to orange juice, to water, to barely drinking anything at all.)

When Ivo eats – if Ivo eats – it is bread. *As if he were* some kind of bizarre caterpillar that had emerged from Francesca’s body. Almost all caterpillars eat just one kind of food: the Great Spangled Fritillary eats violets; the Monarch, milkweeds; the Red Admiral, nettles and false nettles. Stuffing themselves full of their favoured plant, these eating machines eat themselves senseless. But then as winged creatures, they eat nothing more for the rest of their short lives.

And yet, Ivo always has to leave a nugget behind. This marble of food is a fetishized ritual: it cannot be swallowed. These soft, sometimes hard, sometimes flat, sometimes puffed, sometimes crumbly, marbles of bread stare back at Francesca after every attempt to feed him. They animistically eye her without blinking. They are cruel. They mock her. They are signs of her helplessness.

During this car ride to the hospital, Ivo is *no longer* quiet. Ivo’s sentences are without a single period, without pause. Ivo’s seamless voice is an endless glassy banderol beginning to fill every inch of space, every crevice of the car, every blood vessel of Francesca’s body: travelling in through her ears, touching the tympanum, caressing the hammer-bone, in and all the way to her toes, rolling its way out through her teeth and between her lips. He is begging to stay home. *Why can’t he stay home?* It is so sweet, so childish, so innocent, so pure, so irrefutable, so worthy: unlike any begging she has ever heard from the mouth of any child before. Spoken from his body that was once a graft upon her, the words from Ivo’s mouth caress every molecule of her very being: no distance, no shore from the other side. Ivo’s pleading voice gathers meaning through sound, not content. Perceivable as, not quite but almost, empty words, as if Latin liturgy. Strange and familiar, Ivo is like an archangel, as he melodically, gently and gracefully trumpets his message. All the while more and more yards of Ivo’s glass ribbons fall from his mouth, only to be absorbed wherever they can fit.

Ivo is trying to get the bird inside him out.

Charged up. This is how she finds him after he is swimming laps on the swim team after school. Back and forth, arm overhead, breath

every three strokes, kick, kick, kick: Ivo’s body moves forward, without him. He can swim forever. An unstoppable willpower, just like his polite refusal of food. Pulling Francesca like a toy on the end of a long string, bringing her closer, closer, closer, until...

He holds her immobile under his own wing.

Ivo’s fleshless body keeps him near to his mother. They are a couple, like the nursing child and mother they once were. But now there is no milk. There is an absence of milk, of food.

As long as Ivo remains hungry, *he* will not be alone.

As long as Ivo remains hungry, *she* will not be alone.

She fills him not with food, but with some other precious essence.

Withholding makes Ivo perversely special. More special than a new baby.

He is ‘I’.

She is ‘O’.

Together they are ‘V’(ictorious).

A ‘V’ is a funnel.

A ‘V’ has a hole at the bottom.

A ‘V’ is *never* full.

V. V. V.

Francesca’s old grey Saab is hovering over the highway. Ungrounded, Francesca’s ears echo with Ivo’s pleas to stay home. He is her. He is destroying her with each note, with each word, like a pencil writing the same letters over and over on a single page, the paper thinning and thinning until it begins to make holes.

The evening primroses in the garden at home are beginning to pop.

The last of the evening primroses have popped.

She is parking the tired, grey car in the grey, glum lot adjacent to the Paediatric-psychiatric hospital, on this hot summer evening. The three of them enter the third floor ward. The fragile ten-year-old boy, with his grey, chapped, peeling lips and his thinning copper hair looks disarmingly distant. Blue veins are pumping hard at his temples. His very thin legs are twigs. He is dragging his feet, which appear heavy and huge. He is being tenderly coaxed to walk forward (he is barely moving at all) by his mother, wide-eyed with fear. The happy, chubby baby is perched on his mother’s hip and is smiling.

Finally, all three see Virgil, and they pick up their pace to greet him.

Virgil is sitting in the reception area on a black vinyl couch. He has cancelled his classes. Virgil's eyes are filled with dry scepticism and heavy concern. His eyes are working hard to tell Francesca that she needs to be cautious. With his eyes, he is explaining that perhaps they should not hand Ivo over to this questionable place. Felix is wiggling with delight at the sight of his father. Felix wants to be held by Virgil. But Virgil is missing Felix's little raptures. Felix's reverie remains unseen by the one who is inducing it.

'You should go talk to the nurses,' Virgil says. 'There are forms to fill out. They want us to sign away our rights to take him home when we want to. *You had better read it over carefully.*' Virgil emphasizes this last phrase with far-reaching eyes, so as to penetrate Francesca's mind. With his eyes, he is clenching her shoulders. With his eyes he is squeezing her shoulders tight, with both hands. It hurts. With his eyes, he is ready to yell. With his eyes, he is threatening to grab Ivo and run the hell out of this hideous place. He is doing it all with his eyes. He is trying to protect Ivo. He does not want Ivo to notice. Ivo does not notice. Or does he?

'What?' asks Francesca in disbelief, with her nose wrinkling, her eyes squinting, and her mouth in a grimace.

Francesca thinks she might vomit.

Francesca asks to speak with the doctor in charge and to see the room where Ivo will be staying. The doctor, a thin woman who appears to be the same age as Francesca, leads her to the ward where Ivo will be sleeping.

Francesca feels awkwardly younger than her. Francesca feels stripped of any authority. The doctor, full of cool confidence in her crisp white coat and smartly cut blond hair, puts Francesca on edge.

She is treating Francesca efficiently, as if she were the patient, as if she were a child, as if she were a piece of paper to be filed, a bed to be made, a floor to be swept, a mess at the end of a meal.

Hysteria is just beneath Francesca's skin, ready to break out like a rash.

She has let things go too far.

She has been harmfully indulgent.

Francesca, in self-conscious silence, whose falling hem and brown suede heels (a little too high, a little too worn) register her ineptness with every step, is walking next to the blond doctor. The doctor leads the way, a short walk to the ward for boys ages four through twelve.

Inside, the place is teeming with young boys at play. Two are facing

off in a game of ping-pong; another pair is playing backgammon; one is alone, fooling around with table hockey; a few are teasing and jumping and rolling and poking around with each other like boys do; others are just lolling around. The normalcy of the scene within the horrible atmosphere of the cold, sterile, hospital surprises and worries Francesca. It is as if the boys are just hanging out at school, or at the YMCA pool, or some other institutionalized social space. Francesca is thinking that the atmosphere should be more special. She wants the boys to be coddled.

The doctor has led Francesca into the bedroom, where Ivo will be sleeping. His room is off the central game room. Although the doctor is carefully talking to Francesca, explaining how long most of the boys stay, when they eat, what the rules are for visits from family and friends and other important (if impossible to fathom) details, Francesca is not hearing a word of it. She is registering the scene. The room's furnishings are very spare: two single beds, with thin mattresses and no box springs, covered by scrappy, acid-yellow bedspreads. Francesca is feeling stunned by the *two* beds. She had never imagined that Ivo would share a room with another 'troubled' child.

Francesca had imagined that she would be able to stay with Ivo in a private room, as she had with Henry, when he had fallen out of the second-story window. He was just two years old. (Henry must have had wings, which magically fluttered him safely down to a pile of sticks, leaves and grass: ephemera that became arms in waiting.)

Francesca had assumed that Ivo's room would be nourishing in every sense of the word. Punctuated by bright solid colours, the tidy and uninviting hospital room is trying not to look like a hospital room.

Francesca is gasping...

Francesca is ready to leave as soon as she sees the beds. Her eyes near bursting, she is trying to hold back the tears. Taking this as a cue, the doctor gently takes Francesca's hand into her own cool, thin hand and firmly leads her out of the clinical bedroom, back through the main game room and past the attendants who sit at the ward's front desk near the exit door – their faces blank – their eyes bored by the fluorescent-lit charge before them.

There is no doorknob to get out: just a flat metal circle in its place. The ward is what the profession calls a 'locked unit'.

Francesca needs to get out.

Francesca looks at the doctor, right in the eyes. The doctor gestures to one of the attendants to buzz them out. With a buzz and a click, the lock is released and the doctor pushes the door open and leads the way out. Francesca moves slowly, turning back only once to catch the eye of a young boy who is staring at her and the doctor as they leave. He looks *normal*.

Francesca swallows her heart.

Francesca swallows her tears.

Francesca still needs to vomit.

The doctor leads Francesca into a large white room, furnished with very modern moulded white plastic chairs with shiny brushed steel legs, round as pipes, and a white, blue-speckled Formica-covered table. The two women sit down. Francesca spews words (that she will never remember) and tears that can no longer be swallowed.

Suddenly, Francesca notices the one-way mirror at the center of the wall in front of her. Almost instantly, she gains control. She ceases crying. She takes a very deep breath. A choking, gasping, shaking breath, like that of a child after a tantrum. Transformed, Francesca begins to breathe normally. Her swollen eyes are refusing to bear any more tears. Francesca is looking at the doctor with dry eyes. Francesca says five words that she will remember saying: 'I cannot leave Ivo here.'

The doctor leads Francesca back to the waiting room to be reunited with Ivo, Virgil and Felix.

Francesca makes a deal with Ivo. She tells him that she will not leave him here at the hospital, if he promises to eat something (candy, crackers, cookies) from the gift shop before they leave *and* if he promises he will swallow a pill. For months, the doctors along with Francesca have been trying to get Ivo to begin anti-anxiety medication. But Ivo always refused. He could not be prodded. Francesca had thought of sneaking a pill into his small bits of food. But the doctors recommended against it. Ivo needs to trust her. Ivo needs to understand how to begin taking care of himself, how to feed himself, how to keep himself alive.

Francesca takes Ivo by his cold hand to the hospital gift shop to buy some candy or some chips or something that he might eat. Virgil and Felix remain on the vinyl couch in the waiting room.

Francesca leads Ivo into the little gift store. The place is filled to the brim with get-well stuffed bears, dogs and cats. There are cards with perverted renditions of what had once been A. A. Milne's attractive

drawings of Pooh, Piglet and Eeyore. Mylar, helium-inflated balloons (silver, orange, yellow, lots of purple), in the shapes of hearts, ovals and the cartoon cat Garfield, dance about the ceiling atop strings of birthday ribbons, exclaiming 'GET WELL!' Ivo and Francesca are searching the racks of candy, nuts and artificial cheese-filled crackers for something that he might eat. No he will not eat a chocolate bar (no Mars Bar, no Nestlé Crunch, no Milky Way, no Almond Joy, no Three Musketeers).

Francesca is begging and pleading for Ivo to eat chocolate, caramel, marshmallow, Haribo, anything. Francesca cannot believe that she is in the psychiatric ward of a hospital, with a ten-year-old boy who will not eat junk.

'How about a bag of gummy bears?' Francesca asks, with as much cheeriness as she can muster.

'I don't know. I can't decide,' Ivo flatly says.

In time, Ivo settles on Skittles: sugar, corn syrup, partially hydrogenated soybean oil, fruit juice from concentrate (grape, strawberry, lemon, lime, orange), less than 2 percent – citric acid, dextrin, natural and artificial flavours, gelatine, food starch modified, colouring (includes yellow 6 lake, red 40 lake, yellow 5 lake, blue 2 lake, blue 1 lake, yellow 5, red 40, yellow 6, blue 1), ascorbic acid. Bright, multi-coloured, fruit-flavoured, shiny, nearly flat, tiny circles of very chewy, pure sugar – the pack has 240 calories (25 from fat) and 50 percent of your recommended daily value of Vitamin C.

Francesca and Ivo purchase the Skittles and return to the reception area and sit on one of the black vinyl couches next to Virgil and Felix. With his eyes wide open, Ivo is eating the Skittles slowly and deliberately, one by one.

Purple. Green. Purple. Yellow. Green. Red. Orange. Yellow.

Virgil and Francesca are standing watch. Felix is sleeping; his timing for sleep is convenient.

Francesca sees Ivo, the old Ivo, on the horizon, returning to her, like one of those cliff swallows that fly all the way from Argentina to California every spring. The flight is 15,000 miles. Before taking off, they eat heartily for 120 days: ingesting 1,000 flies, spiders and worms daily. Yet, during their migration, while elegantly flapping their wings and serenely coasting from dawn to sunset, they hardly eat at all. They live on air. They waste nothing. They nearly waste away.

With his tongue stained dark purple, green and red, Ivo eats his last Skittle: a yellow one.