

The Swedish Dolls

A cop patrolling Golden Gate Park at 3:00 a.m. spotted a derelict white van that looked abandoned. His flashlight beam caught movement inside – moving rags and four dots of light. The rags rose from the floor of the van. The cop saw matted hair and thought it was a ‘shaggy dog.’ Tiny hands rose from both sides of the rag bundles. The cop opened the van’s unlocked door. He recoiled and retched from the overpowering stench of filth and decaying skin from untreated lesions. He moved quickly into the van and removed two small children weak from hunger. At first the children didn’t speak. The cop thought they might be deaf and dumb. He finally asked, “Mommy? Daddy?” The boy pointed to a knoll about 100 yards from the van.

While waiting for an ambulance, the cop yelled out for the parents. No response. Paramedics arrived, examined the children, noting malnutrition and dehydration.

A K-9 team arrived. Cops and dogs fanned out toward the knoll. The parents were found lying together at the edge of a Rhododendron bush. Paramedics pronounced them, “Dead, all right - dead drunk.” Efforts to revive them failed. The parents couldn’t walk, stand up, or even *wake* up. They were taken to the hospital where they died two days later.

At the hospital, nurses painstakingly removed layers of encrusted filth and dirt from the children’s bodies, revealing twin blondes, a boy and a girl, estimated ages five years old. One of the nurses dubbed them the Swedish dolls.

The state’s Protective Services Department placed the children in foster care. At the first court hearing, the Children’s Court Judge ordered the parents, Dale and Emma Saunders, to begin treatment for their drug and alcohol addiction. Social workers would supervise any visits with the children.

Two months later the parents' court appointed attorney asked the judge to allow unsupervised visits with the children.

The Children's Court Judge is young for a judge, in her mid-thirties. She rose to prominence through her work obtaining expensive medical treatment for severely abused children. Her credentials as someone who would protect children seemed sound. She wasn't stupid, but she was soft; the product of a privileged upper middle-class family, seldom exposed to the criminal underclass, and unaccustomed to dealing with sociopaths. This hearing is her third since she became the Judge of the Children's Court, often referred to disparagingly as "Kiddie Court." Because the Judge wanted to be liked, the parents' attorney knew that her emotions could be exploited to cloud her judgment.

The hearing began. "So," the Judge said cheerily, "the parents are requesting a birthday party for their twins." Before she could continue, the father reached inside his shirt and pulled out a medallion on a dirty string around his neck. Holding it up before him like a talisman he declared, "Forty days of sobriety, your Honor! I'm *clean*! I feel great!"

"That's wonderful," her Honor coos. The father's little melodrama hijacked the courtroom. It was his stage, and like a consummate actor he dominated it with his brazen energy, convincing the Judge in an instant that his recovery might be genuine.

The lawyer for the state child protection agency was a recent law graduate in his first job, and this was his first time before this Judge. He still believed that the Judge would objectively evaluate the record of a case -- the "tracks" or lack of "tracks" -- made by the parents in their court ordered treatment program. But he was a quick study, and about to get a lesson in the dissembling of sociopaths.

“Your Honor,” he began, “please allow time to verify what Mr. Saunders has just said about his sobriety. You previously ordered him to attend AA meetings daily and to get a psychological evaluation to test his ...” That’s as far as the young lawyer got before Saunders resumed his show.

“Forty days! I’m not lying, Judge.” The father smiled engagingly at the Judge, and she smiled back at him.

“We are not at the end of this case,” the Judge says. “We have several more months to monitor the parents’ progress. At this point we want to reward *any* progress, and we don’t want to deprive the children of a happy experience. We are not here to decide whether I will return custody to the parents. We’re here merely to decide if this family can be together to celebrate their children’s birthdays.”

The agency’s lawyer informed the Judge that Mrs. Saunders’ recent behavior has a *direct* bearing on whether to allow unsupervised visits. The Judge nodded for him to proceed, but to be quick about it. He knew that he couldn’t risk arguing against the father, with whom the judge seemed enthralled, so he spoke about the mother instead. “The mother, Mrs. Saunders, presents a real danger to the children. We have reports from the treatment center where she is living - *was* living. Last week, she wanted a drink and asked to leave the facility. The night counselor told her she couldn’t leave. She offered him sex for a pass out of the building. That didn’t work, so she started a fire in her room. The fire consumed several residential rooms before the fire department arrived. She placed her own life and the lives of several residents at risk. After the police took her away she tried to kill herself by slitting her wrists. She was hospitalized and placed on suicide watch. She was released on bond only two days ago. She’s still unstable and a danger to herself and her children.”

The agency's lawyer thought he had the Judge's attention. "A few words about the children, Judge. They're thriving in their foster home. They haven't asked to see their parents and, until now, the parents haven't asked to see the children. Finally, Judge, if there is to be a birthday visit, let the social workers *supervise*. That way we can be sure that everyone has a safe time."

During the lawyer's presentation the father smiled imploringly at the Judge and the Judge discreetly acknowledged his attention. The father didn't have to say another word. The mother sat rag-like and expressionless and appeared completely wasted and uninterested.

At this point the agency's lawyer overcame his reluctance to piss off the Judge. He had nothing to lose.

"At the hearing two months ago, you ordered a treatment plan for the parents to deal with their addictions. Your order included psychological evaluations to help you, the Court, understand why Mr. and Mrs. Saunders were not able to care for their children. The psychologist who evaluated Mr. Saunders found him to be addicted to methamphetamine and alcohol, and also noted that he is a cunning sociopath who has no regard for the feelings or welfare of others, and thinks only of himself.

"Your Honor, these parents can't be trusted alone with the children. We are only two months into court-ordered treatment for substance abuse so severe that the parents have placed their own pathological need for drugs and alcohol before the most minimal concern for their children's welfare. When the children were picked up in the park, they were living like feral animals. They knew only how to eat with their hands. Now, they have been weaned from junk food, and have learned how to use a knife and fork. Their language skills and vocabulary have developed beyond the little grunts they uttered when rescued.

“The impulses that drove the parents only two months ago, and long before that, cannot have been brought under control so quickly. Clearly, the mother is still a risk to herself and the children. As for the father, Mr. Saunders, we only have the father’s unverified assertions of sobriety – that he is capable of supervising his wife and ensuring that no harm comes to the children. I implore your Honor to rule on the side of the children’s safety. Begin with supervised visits. If that goes well, we might proceed to *unsupervised* visits. That way, there won’t be any risk to the children.”

The lawyer sat down heavily and waited. Her Honor proceeded to lecture him.

“Counsel, while I acknowledge your concerns, I must remind you that the purpose and policy of the law in abuse and neglect cases under the Children’s Code is to reunite families, and to that end we, all of us, *you* included, have to accommodate this Court’s effort to normalize family relations. I think that a birthday party might be just such an effort.

“Mr. Saunders, do you have a residence approved by Children’s Protective Services?”

“Yes, your Honor.”

“You live there alone?”

“Yes, your honor.”

“Do you understand that the social workers are free to drop in and visit with you, even unannounced?”

“Yes, your Honor.”

“If I let the children attend the birthday party, will you supervise their mother and guarantee that she behaves appropriately, including not drinking any alcohol.”

“Yes, your Honor, I will do that, most certainly, your Honor.”

Finally, the hammer fell.

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“Tomorrow, the children’s social workers will transport the children from the foster home to the father’s home and leave them there under the father’s supervision for three hours. The social workers will also transport the mother to the party. At 3:00 p.m., the social workers will pick the children up and return them to the foster home. I will expect you both to get serious about your treatment programs. We’re adjourned.”

The social workers complied with the Judge’s order. At 3:00 p.m., they returned to the father’s apartment to pick up the children. No one was home. The white van was gone. The apartment was unlocked. The social workers entered the apartment and found a note on the kitchen table.

The kids are begging to go to McDonalds. We don’t have the heart to say NO. Everything OK. Left a few minutes ago. Mom doing OK. Back by 5. Please don’t be mad. God bless. Dale Saunders.

The kitchen table was smeared with half eaten cake and melted ice cream. The social workers called their supervisor to report what they had found. The problem was easily solved by doing nothing. The McDonalds franchises within five square miles around Dale Saunders’ apartment were so numerous that it wouldn’t be practical to search for the family. For the same reason it wouldn’t be practical to call the police. The supervisor told the social workers to stand by until 5:00, and to call her if the parents hadn’t returned.

The parents got as far as Needles, a ratty desert town on the Nevada border, where they were apprehended by the Highway Patrol. They were nearly as wasted as they had been in Golden Gate Park two months earlier. The children weren’t with them.

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Pressed, the parents told the police that after they got to Needles, the children drifted off when they stopped for gas and a bite to eat. They had looked for the kids, but it was dark, and they didn't find them. No, they hadn't thought to call the police because they were so tired from traveling and confused by an unfamiliar place. The search of the van revealed several ounces of crystal meth. Food receipts in the van placed the parents at a McDonald's restaurant in Bakersfield the previous day. The officers called and spoke with the employees there who recalled the parents and the kids. They weren't hard to miss. The family stayed a long time, visiting with two Mexican men. It all seemed very friendly. The Mexican guys smiled at the kids a lot and stroked their blonde hair. They bought Mickey D toys for the kids. Finally, the children left with the Mexican guys. No one saw any of them after they went out to the parking lot. No one could describe the two Mexican guys, other than to say they were "Mexican guys. One skinny, one fat."

The Swedish Dolls have never been found.

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