

# Nightmare mother 'wasn't me'

*Returned to sanity, Trueman recalls night of madness from detached view*

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**T**HERE'S A BLANK stare on Donna Trueman's pale face as she pushes the mental rewind button that takes her back to Oct. 9, 1991.

In a measured tone, her body motionless, Trueman recalls the nightmare that saw a broomstick thrust through Adolf Hitler's head.

As she talks, Trueman is like an innocent bystander who was forced to watch the horror that unfolded in the second-floor bedroom of her Brooklands townhouse.

"I can remember everything that happened that night," the dark-haired 32-year-old says as she sits cross-legged on the couch of her parent's home.

"And the only way that I can see it is that it wasn't me. That's the way I look at it because that's the only way I can look at it."

But the awful truth is that it was Trueman's hands wielding the broomstick. And the person she thought was Hitler was actually her four-year-old son, Skylar.

Throughout this unflinching playback, there is no emotion in Trueman's voice. Her mother explains there are no more tears left.

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Trueman made legal history on March 13 when she became the first Canadian to be tried and found not guilty under a new law.

Just five months after she killed Skylar, a judge ruled her mental disorder prevented her from being held criminally responsible. Five days later, Mr. Justice Kenneth Hanssen released her into the care of her parents after the province's chief psychiatrist said she posed no risk to herself or the public.

"That law was made for people like me," Trueman says of the amendment to the Criminal Code, which replaced a 190-year-old law many felt was an inhumane way of treating what used to be referred to as the criminally insane.

"I'd never been mentally ill. Never had a mental illness problem. And then all of a sudden this happens."

Trueman realizes the progressive nature of the new law. And she knows psychiatrists and other mental health professionals testified there was no reason why she shouldn't be released.

Still, she initially had difficulty reconciling the fact the justice system could allow her to go free.

"What went through my mind was how could they do that? How could he let me go after what I'd done? And yet I hadn't done anything."

"It's like being another person. Another person did that, not me. I feel guilty all the time. And yet I shouldn't. But I do."

Trueman would also feel hurt. Hurt from the public outrage her release sparked. And hurt from the way people sometimes still look at her, like the woman who thought she was Satanic.

But in a sense, Trueman almost understands why people who didn't know her were scared of her.

"It's kind of funny because I never was



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## Donna Trueman's legal odyssey:

■ Oct. 10: Trueman kills four-year old Skylar. Trueman forces her eldest daughter to watch the murder.

■ Oct. 11: Trueman is arrested and charged with Skylar's murder. She is placed under the care of psychiatrists at the province's forensic services unit.

■ Feb. 5: Trueman is sent to the women's jail in Portage la Prairie.

■ March 13: Mr. Justice Kenneth Hanssen finds Trueman not guilty of murder, ruling her mental disorder prevented her from being criminally responsible.

■ March 18: Hanssen releases Trueman into the care of her parents.

■ June 10: Trueman will appear before the Board of Review who will assess the conditions of her release.

Trueman was the first Canadian to be tried under a new provision to the Criminal Code which replaced what many felt was an archaic way of trying the criminally insane.

The 190-year-old law was struck down by the Supreme Court last spring.

Under the new law, a judge has three choices of how to deal with a person not found guilty because of a mental disorder.

The judge can give an outright release, a release with certain conditions or confinement to a psychiatric hospital.

The Board of Review then monitors that order, and if necessary, adjusts it for the balance of the person's life.

Previously, those who pleaded guilty by reason of insanity could be held indefinitely on Lieutenant Governor's warrants.

The psychosis that plagued Donna Trueman essentially meant she was out of touch with reality.

There is a broad range of psychosis, and its onset can be caused by a number of factors, including stress.

However, it can be treated through therapy and medication.

the kind of person that could be around people who were mentally disordered in any way. It bothered me."

Today, she can't help but view things differently.

"I understand it more," she confesses.

"There is nothing to be afraid of."

## Trueman, right, visits with 12-year-old Amanda Frandsen.

Public understanding is something the Canadian Mental Health Association has been pleading for over the years.

"The profound impact and stigma of mental illness really leaves people with fear," says Bev Gutray, executive director of the CMHA's Winnipeg region.

"When they don't understand the behavior, they try and avoid it or see them as someone different."

But Gutray says mental illness can afflict everyone. Studies show that one in three Canadians will seek help for emotional problems. And one in six will be affected to the degree that they require professional help.

"We tend to think that it can't happen to us, but it does," Gutray says.

Heather Frandsen has known Trueman since their high school days at Cecil Rhodes. And the woman who has shared many tears with Trueman since Skylar's death thinks things would have been different if her friend had been drunk, on drugs — or male.

**B**UT TRUEMAN broke a maternal taboo which Frandsen says the public refuses to forgive her for. "It's so hard for people to make sense of it."

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It was only after therapy that Trueman began to emerge from the psychosis that plagued her last November. And as she did, she had to come to grips with what she had done.

"I was very upset and I became suicidal," she recalled.

"But they helped me through that. And I asked a lot of questions. 'I said does this happen a lot. What's the scoop?' And they said this has been happening since the beginning of time, that people do go crazy."

By all accounts, Trueman has made a remarkable recovery, aided by antipsychotic medication. Today she says she feels like the Donna Trueman of old. But that doesn't make it any easier for her.

As part of the conditions for her release, she has to remain under the supervision of her parents at all times. She says she's gone from a full-time mother to a full-time nothing.

"It's like a jail because I don't go anywhere because of public scrutiny."

Her weekly routine consists of trips to the doctor, monitoring by a social worker, and visits with friends like Frandsen. But most of the time is spent at home with her mother. She tries her best to keep busy. But that doesn't stop her from reliving that awful past.

"I mean, I talk about it all the time, every day."

Trueman also worries about a possible return of the psychosis. She explains that you don't suddenly become psychotic. The problems she experienced last fall — that she sought therapy for — were triggered in part by the stress of being a single mother.

She says a psychotic relapse would be gradual, and because of the care she is under, noticed before something happened.

Still, that doesn't stop her from periodically taking some reality checks, as if she could someone detect its return.

"They say I should be very proud of how far I've gotten. I don't feel proud of that, so there is not much pride in my life."

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When Trueman was released March 18, she was thankful for the little things, like just flopping on the furniture. She also got to see for the first time her new nephew who was born the weekend of her arrest.

As she looks toward her hearing before the Board of Review June 10 that will assess the conditions of her release, she longs for the chance to see her two daughters, aged three and 12.

"I talk with my sister-in-law and they always say that they want to see me."

Other than perhaps getting a job, she has no other plans for the future.

"I don't have any long-term plans. It's just one day at the time. And there's not a day goes by that we don't talk about this."