

## Chapter 1 – The Psych Halfway House

My first job was in an office. I hated it. No, that's not true. Actually, I liked the job. It was the people I hated. Thus from the start, I was destined for a long line of jobs in 'the people professions'.

Perhaps most notable of these was my job at 602, a residential program run by the Mental Health Association. Selected patients from the local psych hospital (those with potential!) were transferred, at some point in time, to 602 – so called because its address was 602 Bonkers Street – where the staff would teach the residents life skills, help them find a job and an apartment, and generally provide support during their transition from institutionalized living to independent living. (I highly recommend the program to those who work in an office.) I was hired as a relief worker and mostly covered the midnight shift. Which meant that I helped the residents make the transition from sleeping in a bed to sleeping in a bed.

Which was okay because I would've had trouble teaching life skills. How to buy groceries, how to keep track of your chequing account – these were adults we were dealing with, and I had neither the desire nor the need to infantilize them. After all, people who need people are, well, codependent.

Besides, you want life skills? Okay, how about how to deal with the recognition that you're never really going to amount to much. And how to be content nevertheless. And, yes, how to make foil headgear that is durable yet fashionable.

On my first midnight shift, I took Kessie with me, partly thinking of all those sweet and cuddly animal therapy programs, and partly thinking that if I dozed off, she'd be my alarm system, sure to wake up growling the second any crazy with a knife walked into the room. Turned out, she refused to go sleep. I stretched out on the couch and she sat on my head. All night. At full alert. Apparently ready to scream. The place scared her.

No wonder. All of my coworkers had previous experience with mental illness. First-hand. In fact, I think that was a prerequisite for obtaining a full-time position. A relapse seemed to be the prerequisite for promotion.

Unfortunately, it turned out I was hired just in time for the annual staff retreat. I suspected it was an office party disaster waiting to happen. I didn't want to go. But I also didn't want to be reprimanded, yet again, for not being a team player. Damned if I do, damned if I don't.

So Friday evening, six of us piled into Kathy's minivan. We were obviously going to get a headstart on the group bonding thing. I asked if that was fair. They smiled indulgently and said, "Oh you just want to drive down on that new Harley of yours instead of being with us." Well yeah. Duh.

We arrived at the retreat site, which was well off the highway, and for a second I was glad I came – it was beautiful. Forest as far as the eye could see, in orange and gold and scarlet, a sparkling dark blue lake, a couple canoes on the shore, gentle babbling from a stream that fed the lake... We spent the entire next two days inside. Replenishing our inner spirits.

Saturday began with a pre-breakfast yoga session, a breakfast get-to-know-you, two morning sessions, and a lunch mixer. So I was told. I don't get up until noon. (Well,

unless I work the midnight shift. Then I don't go to bed until noon. Which means that on any given day, or, well, on any given night I guess – oh never mind.)

At around 1:00 p.m., I found myself being hustled to the first of three afternoon sessions by one of my coworkers, Clara. Who was way too chirpy. Obviously a morning person. I grabbed a carafe of tea and a cup from the lunch table as we passed it, and stuffed some creamers and a plastic-wrapped egg salad sandwich into my pocket. She led me into a roomful of people, and to the corner occupied by the 602 staff.

"Hello again," the session leader at the front of the room said, and beamed. "Wasn't that a fantastic lunch?" she asked, and everyone applauded. Applause? For egg salad? Plastic-wrapped egg salad? I looked around. A lot of people looked suspiciously beatific. Did I miss something spectacular? Were the leaders that charismatic? No wait, I've seen that look – they're fucking all on Prozac! I missed the free samples!

"What we're going to do first this afternoon," she continued as if she were about to present a won-der-ful gift, "is something called 'What Colour are You?'" You've got to be kidding. I had finished my first cup of tea and had poured a second, but was still way too tired to run through my Meyers-Briggs critique, and anyway these people should know better, this is all so old, and lame, " – but with a little twist." Her eyes twinkled. Mine twitched. "I want you to think about what colour each of your coworkers is. Then we'll have you pow-wow in your work groups to share your perceptions. Be open. Be honest. Remember, those are the building blocks of a good team..." Yeah right. Like I'm gonna fall for that again. (When did you stop hitting your wife?) Director Jean, you're airhead blue. Kathy, you're – oh my god. They're all airhead blue.

"I'm going to pass on this one," I said, "I really haven't had time to get to know any of you," I tried to smile. "And I really have to pee," I pointed to the carafe.

When I returned to the room, I discovered that things could indeed get worse. Each session ended with a group hug. I looked around. Surely they don't have enough Academy Awards on hand to cover this performance.

The next session was a 'revitalizer'. Up on our feet, stretch up, that's it, one arm, skyreach, the other arm, skyreach, now climb that ladder into the clouds – I can't believe I'm doing this. I imagined myself presenting these warm-ups to my old track buddies, started to laugh, caught Clara's glance, then imagined myself packing it in right then and there and going for a long run through the forest. That's it, now exhale, and blow those clouds away! Good! Now stand on one leg and lift the other, from the hip, that's it, how do you feel?

"Like a dog taking a piss." Oops. Jean gave me a look of disappointment. As did Kathy, Clara, and Lynn.

And then it was time for another group hug.

Shortly after the retreat, we got a new resident, Dave. Dave was what we called a 'high functioning' person. He could tie his own shoelaces. Within a week, he was placed at the local 'sheltered workshop,' another MHA program, designed to provide employment opportunities to both the mentally delayed and the mentally ill. (I never did understand why the two were put together. Would you put Gomer Pyle and Adolf Hitler in the same treatment program?)

Speaking of 'mentally delayed,' what a wonderfully optimistic label. Your train will, some day, pull into the Normal IQ Station, dear. It's just been a little delayed.

Delayed, deschmayed. His train was derailed.

As for the workshop, it was a woodworking enterprise that made crafts and furniture which nobody bought. Except the employees of the MHA. At Christmas time. I imagined those at the workshop spending the morning putting round pegs into round holes and the afternoon putting square pegs into square holes.

When Dave came home at the end of his first day, he said the job sucked, and he couldn't stand his boss. He wanted to quit. I congratulated him, telling him that he was certainly on the road to recovery, and if he kept the job for five years, he'd be normal, if not healthy.

One midnight shift, when I had finished Inside the Mind of a Cat – which should be required reading for all new staffers, by the way – and didn't have anything else with me, I started on the house copy of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual on Mental Disorders. Christ, was I sick.

The next night, eager to display what I had learned, I gave my coworker a pop quiz.

"Why did the delusional person cross the road?" Lynn waited expectantly. "Because he thought the grass was greener on the other side." We laughed. Okay, I laughed. Lynn disapproved.

"Here's another one. Why did the masochist cross the road? He didn't. Because the grass was greener on the other side." Yuk yuk.

I held up Sheila's file. "Why did the passive personality cross the road? Because I told her to," I said and giggled.

"No, no, one more – " Lynn was leaving the office, wringing her hands. I waved Bob's file, our King of Hallucinations, "Why did the schizophrenic cross the road? To follow the chicken!" That one always cracked me up.

It's not that I don't have any sympathy for those who are mentally ill. It's just that I can't figure out which mental illness leaves you with an inability to do your own laundry and a tendency to leave half an inch of milk in the pitcher when there are two bags sitting on the bottom shelf.

One of the midnight duties was to get the morning meds ready. This meant making sure the right number of pinks and whites and blues and yellows were in the proper dispensers labelled for whoever got said pinks and whites and blues and yellows. Once I played musical chairs with everyone's meds for a week. Oddly enough, there was no noticeable difference in anyone's behaviour.

So, seeking an alternative to pharmaceutical therapy, and just plain curious, I wondered what would happen if I acted crazier than the residents. One day I served everyone a slice of cake batter. Another day I posted signs written in my own private language, Wittgenese.

Regular staff didn't agree, but I say that did result in an improvement – if only because of a general increase in self-esteem: I mean, compared to me, they figured they were doing pretty good. They weren't stupid, after all; they were just sick.

Or they were Mary Margaret. She heard a voice in her head. It was God. So the staff thought she was crazy. I thought they were jealous. Or just as crazy. And I told them so at the next staff meeting.

"You all believe in God?" I asked, by way of explanation.

Of course. Nods and murmurs of assent all round.

"And you pray?"

Yes, indeed they did.

"But none of you hears voices, none of you hears God."

No, we do not, of course not.

"So you spend your time – some of you, your life – talking to a god that doesn't ever talk back. And," I continued, "you don't really expect him to."

Mary Margaret lay down naked in the middle of the road one day because God asked her to. She assumed she had been chosen as a sacrifice because at forty, she was still a virgin.

"Why didn't you just go have sex instead?" I asked her, when we were sitting in the tv room one night.

She gave me the oddest look and walked away. Silently. Solemnly.

The next time I was in, I was told she'd been out to the bars every night soliciting men. Apparently she'd had sex with over two dozen in the last week alone. Staff was concerned with this further decline into depravity.

"You know, you only have to do it once to not be a virgin anymore," I told her when, again, we were sitting in the tv room. "I don't think God will choose you to be a sacrifice anymore. Or you can do it with yourself," I added. "That counts."

She looked surprised, confused, relieved, and pleased – though not necessarily in that order.

The following weekend, I was informed that not only had she stopped going out, but she had started going to bed rather early. The staff was relieved – and surprised, pleased, and confused.

"So," I plopped myself down on the couch in the tv room. She was sitting in the chair, her chair, across from me. "Heard from God lately?"

"No," she said with some anxiety, "and I'm a bit worried about what He'll ask me to do next."

"Hm." I thought for a moment. "I have a confession to make." She raised her eyebrows. "God talks to me too. But I don't think it's the same god."

Her eyes widened. She didn't say anything. Clearly she was torn between the possibility that God might speak to someone else and the possibility that there might be another God.

"Every Tuesday at 11:00," I said. "I think that's my appointment time."

Her eyes widened further. "What does he say?" she eventually asked, genuinely interested.

"Oh, lots of stuff," I said casually. "'Be kind.' 'Be happy.' 'Always wear blue.'" Again her eyebrows raised. I pointed to my jeans.

"One time he told me to put my paycheques straight into the bank and only take out so much in cash so I'd always have enough for rent and food. That way I'd always have a safe place of my own, a home. That was real good advice."

Mary Margaret was thinking hard. Very hard.

"But I don't think it's the same god that talks to you," I continued.

"Oh." She seemed sad. "Why?"

"Well he says his name is 'Godd' – he really emphasizes the 'd' at the end, so I

think he spells his name G-o-d-d. How does your god spell his name?"

"He's never said." And until now that wasn't a problem.

I nodded. Wisely.

"Why don't you switch?" I asked.

"What?" Wow. Another possibility to ponder.

"Why don't you switch gods?"

"I didn't know you could do that."

"Oh sure. It's like those long-distance carriers, you know, for phone calls. You just have to call and say you'd like to switch."

So we went into the office and I helped her find the number for Primus, or maybe it was Sprint. And she called right then and there. It was 2:00 in the morning. And the customer rep at the other end, bless her, not only let her switch from God with one 'd' to Godd with two 'ds', but also gave her an appointment time of Fridays at 10:00 p.m.

I saw Mary Margaret at the mall a couple months later. She had moved out of the house and into her own apartment. And she had on the cutest baby blue polyester pantsuit I'd seen since the '70s.

Another time, about two weeks later, I left Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper in the tv room. It and Martha were gone the next week. I heard she left her husband. Plath's Belljar disappeared next, with Jill. I heard she left her husband and her parents. Vonnegut's Eden Express disappeared with Tony. Who took with him 602's entire stock of vitamins. (Well, that and the stereo.) I called it my covert bibliotherapy program. The program ended, unfortunately, when Jean confiscated Szasz's The Myth of Mental Illness.

That same night, coincidentally, Bob attacked Lynn with a kitchen knife, shouting "Let's kill the aliens!" over and over. Okay. Point taken. So when I visited her in the hospital, I took her some reading material. A copy of The Myth of Physical Illness. She actually called Security. And, apparently, Director Jean.