**Notes from a Psychiatric Hospital for Young Adults in Texas**

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Sometimes, the stereotype was true. Hair untended, sock-footed, padding around aimlessly while incoherent narrative fell in and out of formation under their breath. Explosions of violence that was succinctly concluded with a needle to the backside. Drug-induced paralysis of the spirit that kept them as far away from themselves as possible, nodding off into and back from some sort of sweet oblivion.

But mostly we were parodies of ourselves, laughter and sighing converging into a frantic satire that we, in fact, were the crazy ones, broken, often young and tragic, tired of suffering. The most common condition was really a clusterfuck of depression, trauma, and some brand of personality disorder, though bipolar disorder, substance abuse, and schizoaffective disorder often made appearances, as well. True to form, we did possess varying degrees of unpredictability in our behavior, though generally staying away from the people who look like they’re about to kill you usually does the trick. This also goes for friends-turned-psychotic and other special types.

For example, a manic rapper. Though his chart clearly said “Valentin,” he insisted on going by *Jesus,* his rap name.

“I’m getting out of here by this weekend, guaranteed,” he told us.

“Yeah. Of course,” we replied. Like that ever happened around here.

He spent his days frantically buying goods off Amazon, many of which were not even allowed in the unit. His grand purchase was his plane ticket out of Houston back to his hometown, back to his girlfriend (who, considering the grand inflation of his personality, we doubted even existed). When he, in fact, found out that his parents were not allowing him to leave the hospital, Jesus decided that the next logical step would be to call the police, claiming the facility was “holding him hostage.” This resulted in losing phone privileges indefinitely. With his ego and credibility reduced to appropriate size for a psychiatric facility, he limped back to our ranks to begin his extended stay and blessed us for the next few weeks with the absolute worst freestyle rap I have ever heard in my life.

While we found amusement in Jesus’ captivity, it only distracted us from our own run-ins with authority for so long. A group of us once shuffled away in silent empathy from our non-binary friend whom a stocky, domineering staff member demanded change into “appropriate clothes” (Appropriate being a highly ambiguous and gendered term in this case) as they wept uncontrollably at their own objectification. We were crestfallen to hear that they were denied a meal because of this incident, pulling back layers of nicety on the utterly transphobic undercurrent of the facility. Other times, staff was sexist, unaccommodating of patients’ trauma, and in my case, intolerant, insulting and pompous.

“You go to Yale. I’d expect you to think that through better,” a nurse once barked at me, in reference to my religious views. I silently stretched my fingers to rid myself of the shame that was wracking my body; having lost my senses to psychosis and my body to rape, I was fiercely protective of my intelligence. Challenging that, along with the sanctity of belief, conferred upon me a desire for the destruction of self and other—I was just a little more damaged after his comment. I later realized that his affront was an ill-attempt to comfort me, though the empathy was ultimately lost on me.

Yet it wasn’t all bad. “Patio time” was typically scheduled in the glow of the evening light, after the height of the heavy, wet heat of the Texan summer sun. Kings in the Corner was a favorite card game, though some nights, with enough people, we’d pull Rummy or my favorite, Egyptian Rat Screw, from the collective repertoire. I am proud to be the personal champion of Egyptian Rat Screw (abbreviated to ERS), owing both to my speed as well as to my longer-than-usual fingernails, seeing that nail clippers were a prohibited item on the packing list. My constant sequence of victories, though, made the game discouraging for others, who sought to propose games that were less predictable in outcome.

The patio was momentarily removed us from the highly clinical, allowing us to masquerade as free, normal individuals under the same sky as the rest of the world. The walls were just low enough that you could catch sight of the rooftops of a distant development, and occasionally a neighborhood cat would scale the enclosure, looking in on us with what could only be pity. Bunches of Easter lilies bowed their heads in the heat of the day, their sparseness only contributing so much to the ambience. The patio was our playground, our reminder of the outside world, our meditative respite from the screaming that was the world of psychiatry.

It was even the venue to a small wedding. Playful, of course, but a testament to the human spirit of creativity and closeness within the confines of personal catastrophe. It began when my friend (the nonbinary recipient of institutional injustice) called out from the other end of the Eating Disorder Table on my first day: “Hey, will you be my wife?” Not one to turn down marital opportunity, I accepted her offer, thus conferring upon me the title of “wife” for the remainder of our time together. Not to confine the joke to mere semantics, a mutual friend of ours, a weed-smoking, bisexual trauma victim from Colorado, took it upon herself to arrange a formal wedding for us on the patio. With her both ushering and officiating, a small group assembled in the patio with a guitarist and singer to accompany our entrance, and we were “wed” in a joyful celebration of kinship and queerness. While some might scoff that we had nothing better to do, I am retrospectively grateful for the chance to be playful; all of us knew one another deeply in the sorrows we all shared, and any joy we were able to create for ourselves represented the resilience of one of humans’ most important qualities: pure frivolity.

Some of my own frivolity didn’t even seem so frivolous. We hardly speak anymore, even though we exchanged numbers at our parting. The time we spent together was limited, but deliciously secretive, often huddling together just out of sight of the nurses’ station and springing apart at the last second when the staff came around in their 15-minute rounds schedule. He was local to Texas, living only fifteen minutes away from the facility, and unlike me, he was fairly new to the whole mental illness life. The fling began out of empathy; he became more attractive as I convinced him—and myself, for that matter—of his own worth as a person. He was sweet and genuine, and I often lamented that he was clobbered by so acute an affliction.

I had never had a fling at any of the other facilities at which I had spent time, though I knew the system well enough to make it work. We had to work around an iron fisted no-touch policy, even though human touch was what many of us--my fling and I included--needed most. We would kiss in 10-second increments before returning to separate chairs, often causing nurses to hurry frantically over to where we were sitting to confirm what she just saw, only to be greeted by our clever facade of rule-abiding innocence. Nobody did ever catch us holding hands under the puzzle table or confiscate the notebooks where we professed love and mutual sexual fantasies to one another. As we parted, we promised to love each other freely one day, only to be thwarted by the insurmountable distance between his Texas home and later, Chicago, my eventual destination. Still, there’s a faint love I still have for him, for the childish butterflies that gave me a reason to face another day at the hospital in hopes that we might find a moment for the tenderness all humans, especially broken humans, crave. It wasn’t a passionate, physical relationship, but one that taught me the magic of hands touching under the table in solemn secrecy, of kisses shared in haste, of the star-crossed lovers’ modern poetry.

It is a mad clamor to get out, but once out, the doors are closed forever on a peculiar chapter that is only the stuff of memory now. The vows to keep in touch echo with the futile attempt at preserving the camaraderie of being knee-deep in sorrow, a camaraderie that is only meant to exist in the span of the dream that institutionalization truly is. I still find myself attached to the emotional cocoon of being among my own kind as I go about my life, feigning my own stability. I have thus found a bitter love for the prisons that confine me, for memories that haunt me, for the identities that tarnish me; for it is those momentary flashes of pain that set me free, that give me life in a sullen world.