**What They Bring with Them**

Michele Lovell

The kids call it the looney bin, nut house, crazy town. Some of them arrive with nothing but the expressions on their faces and the clothes on their backs. Most bring plenty with them. Often their parents have packed for their stay. Grocery bags or boxes. Suitcases or backpacks. I snap on gloves and sort through it all. Weed out the acceptable from the dangerous. It’s intrusive and necessary, and I do it quickly; it’s part of my job on the psych ward.

I make two piles. One to stay, one to go.

Some of them bring CD players or radios. Because they bring hope that listening to the music they love will help them during this terrible time. These go in the *No* pile because antennas are sharp and, like CDs, they can be used to slice the thin skin of a wrist when no one is watching.

The young ones bring stuffed animals which go in the *Yes* pile once the pretty red ribbons are removed. Because ribbons can be wrapped around necks so tightly you need special scissors to cut them off. Also in the *No* pile are shoelaces, balloon strings and robe ties for the same reason. Leggings are allowed because not all rules make sense. The stringless balloons float to the ceilings where they will stay like tinsel moons until discharge.

No picture frames, compacts, or glass timers. The last one wasn’t on the list until a girl put one in her mouth and chewed it up during evening movie time.

Some bring brand new clothing with tags still on. And instructions, *I want him to try these on first*, like he’s going off to boarding school. They bring nagging feelings that new clothes will make everything better. If only they can get the size right. If only it fits.

Smoke saturated pillows yellow with spit stain.

A family Bible with the names of the dead in fading ink, pages dog-eared and thinning. A talisman. A comfort. A token of faith.

Some pack every item on the suggested list. Three pants, six shirts, six underwear and socks. They believe if they follow the rules, in exchange, we’ll give them answers. Some kind of unspoken ‘Don’t step on a crack and break someone’s back’ magical thinking.

Occasionally, they bring a child they don’t want anymore. And Hefty bags full of everything he owns. I can tell when he arrives with that much stuff, he’s not going back. He’s a state kid, which is to say he belongs to no one. I’ll put his stuff in the storage closet outside the front door where it will sit for the months it will take his caseworker to find him a new home. Sometimes we forget to send these with him when he leaves and won’t find them until we clean out the closet once a year.

Some bring records of past hospitalizations. They bring their own pens to sign the intake forms. The trembling exhaustion of a hundred sleepless nights, knotted muscles, dry eyes. They smile tightly, they drink the cheap apple juice I offer from plastic cups and thank me like it’s something good. They bring years of unanswered questions they have almost, but not quite stopped asking. A shred of hope buried underneath because maybe this will be the time, the stay that unlocks the door to give them back the kid they once had. They tolerate the shabby sterility of the unit. The dirty carpet, the obscenities scratched into plexiglass windows.

I bring my own bag each day. A bag with a peanut butter sandwich, some anti-anxiety medications, a book to read on my break which I never read on my break. I’ve brought two decades of terrible stories, hilarious anecdotes, unbreakable trauma bonds with co-workers. While I check in the bags of makeup, the family photos minus the glass frames, the schoolbooks minus the spirals, the pacifiers for ten-year-olds, and *Goodnight Moon*, and the birth control this Catholic hospital will not prescribe, I know many have brought a deep distrust of everything I represent to them.

They want to know what degree I have.

And how long have I worked here.

And where the hell is the doctor, even though it’s after ten and the doctor is long gone. They’ve brought suggestions. Like don’t put him on that medication again, he gained thirty pounds last time. And we were hoping to go to the other hospital because this one never helps.

Some bring things that don’t make sense. A ‘bag full of crazy’ my co-worker says, because humor here is dark. Once I checked in a girl while she sat on the counter, singing show tunes, making a welcome mat out of a towel with cherry red lipstick. In her bag was a black mini skirt, a clip-on bowtie, and a *Yoga for Golden Years* video. They all went into the *No* pile.

So many bring secrets they ask us to keep.

*He doesn’t know he was adopted.*

*She doesn’t know her mother killed herself (we told her it was a car accident).*

*He doesn’t know he’s staying here—he thinks it’s just a checkup.*

Some want us to fix their children and call them when we’re done. Like a car repair shop. All of them bring terrible stories they feel compelled to tell me. They bring them like they bring the pull-ups, the baby shampoo, the phone numbers to call before bedtime. I listen like a confidante, a therapist, a priest. I think maybe I’m supposed to absolve them of these imagined crimes.

*He texted me goodbye. I knew something was wrong, so I ran out to the car and that’s when I found him.*

*She waited until we left for work. If I hadn’t come back because I forgot my laptop/my phone/my lunch…*

*We didn’t understand why the kittens kept disappearing.*

*We didn’t know. We didn’t know. We didn’t know.*