

Psych ER

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Suddenly I look up and freeze. The little creek I am standing in gurgles happily along but my heart is pounding. Someone has called 911. I look at the freshly broken glass I have in my hand and pull my sleeve down off my shoulder to see if I'm done. I must make every letter bleed. *How will I hide it when they find me?* I ask myself. But I won't. A trickle of blood already seeps through.

The sirens arrive at the park and an EMT checks me out. There are two cops standing by so I can't run. Then the police put me in handcuffs and make me duck as I am led into their car. It all seems like such a ridiculously big deal for nothing. We are headed for the Psych ER.

The door clicks loudly and I am instantly aware that freedom is a precious thing, which I have just lost. I feel panicky, and try to get to where I can see out at an angle through two windows, but there is nothing to see but walls. All I can do now is wait and try to get comfortable in the cold plastic chairs.

It's been two hours. *Will a doctor ever see me?* I know I will probably be here all night, and I know they are watching...the doctors, that is, through the big glass panes that make me feel like a fish in an aquarium. That's why I call it the "tank" instead of the County Psych ER. I look around. There are three kinds of patients; those who are slumped over chairs, those who are pacing the floors, and those who are wailing, shouting and generally carrying on.

The old woman next to me looks awful. Her dress is torn and crumpled and she has at least a few missing teeth. But when she turns her face, I can see a fragment of a twinkle in her eyes.

"What are you doing here?" She asks. "You look so young and so pretty. You shouldn't be in a place like this."

I laugh.

"So what happened?"

"I had a nervous breakdown and have never been the same since."

"Oh my, well you seem OK to me, tonight. Why did they bring you in?" the lady asks.

"I guess one of my friends said I was trying to kill myself."

The urge to kill myself dissipated almost the minute I got locked in, as it usually does, along with whatever other feelings came with it.

"Kill yourself! Why would you do that? Do you have children?"

"Yes," I sigh, as feelings of depression suddenly return. "I have a nine and a twelve year old...I know, I know, everyone says it would ruin them if I killed myself, but when I get suicidal, I lose all perspective."

"What about you, how did you get in here?" I try to change the subject.

"Oh Honey, I just don't know. They keep putting me in here, but I think I'm fine! I feel fine! I just don't like being in this awful place! I do forget things a lot...all the time really. Can you believe I had the sweetest little canary named Pretty Bird and it died last week. My son says I forgot to feed it. I just can't believe I would do such a thing! But I don't know why they brought me here this time. I do wish those doctors would hurry up though!"

Suddenly the big door clicks open and a teenager comes in with her mother. We are momentarily interrupted in our conversation as we watch them anxiously settle in. They obviously haven't been here before.

Then I go on. "I forget things too. All the time. I go to the kitchen to get something and don't have a clue what it was. I can't find my car in the parking lot. I forget to go to my tutoring job. It's supposed to be part of my diagnosis. I just wish I could believe that I am ever going to get well. It's been four years and I feel like I'm just as messed up as I was when I broke down."

The elderly lady has fallen asleep and I envy her. It's almost impossible for me to sleep in crowded lit up places like this, especially with some woman yelling "Oooh God!" at the top of her lungs every five minutes.

For another hour I toss and turn in the chair. I try several of the identical chairs in different arrangements and positions, but they all have hand rests which get in the way. I could ask for a phone if I needed it, but I can't think of any legitimate reason why I need one, and it's after midnight in the outside world anyway.

Suddenly the teenager heads towards the only rest room and I jump up to warn her mother.

"You had better guard the door for her! There are no locks and some of these sick men just love to open it wide up when a girl is using it. The guards pay no attention!"

She responds gratefully and stands by the door, but she can't resist the need to "reach out" to me in a motherly way:

"You sound like you've been here before. By the way, are you a Christian?"

Why do so many people think Christians can't be mentally ill? I won't tell her I've hurt myself. The cuts are hidden under my shirt. Maybe I could just tell her I've been depressed. I am immediately defensive and begin to bombard her with words, which probably should have been aimed at the church or certainly at my mother.

"Yes, I'm a Christian! I've been a Christian since I was three! My parents were missionaries in a third world country. Actually I used to be in charge of a Christian ministry myself for several years, which was small but world-wide. I have spoken at Christian conferences and I had a successful ministry with drug addicts in my neighborhood.."

"Well Honey, don't you know that all you have to do is forgive the past and God will heal you and you'll feel him present in your life just like you used to?"

"No!" I say emphatically. Then I walk around the whole tank before I am calm enough to answer.

"I forgave the people that caused my illness over and over all my life from the very moment things happened even as a little child. Forgiving is my mother's biggest pet peeve. I was also taught that problems were always my fault, not anyone else's, and that if anyone hurts me I should forgive and forget immediately and that would fix it.

"I was raised in foster homes in a foreign country and was hurt a lot.

I don't let the lady get a word in edgewise and my voice is gradually rising.

"I forgave and forgot all these things, only to find after a nervous breakdown, that they were still as real and present in my brain as if they had just happened. I had never had a chance to recognize them as wrong. Christians don't like anger, but God was angry all through the Bible. When evil happens in this world, God wants us to fix it, not forget it!"

"Well you're not really mentally ill and you shouldn't call yourself that. You're just grieving." She was desperately trying to keep her world view intact. I could understand that, but I couldn't go along with it.

"I can't tell you the things I go through!" I told her. "I can't possibly make you understand the weeks of sheer terror; the confusion, the frequent complete malfunction of my brain, however

temporary; the inability to stop screaming, the desperate 24-hour need to hurt myself, the fear of everyone around me. You don't understand, do you! You don't understand!"

Suddenly the guard warns me sternly, "Are you going to calm down or do we need to put you in a "safe" room?"

The "safe room" is a euphemism for solitary confinement.

"I'm sorry," I rush to say. "I didn't realize I was yelling." I turn to the mother, "I hope I didn't hurt you or your daughter."

I almost run to the other side of the room. The room is reeling and I have a terrible headache, and suddenly I can't remember anything I said to her so I know I have switched to a different part of me. At least the guards leave me alone.

I find a seat as far from the mother and her daughter as I can, and begin remembering events from my childhood.

I am back to being scared again, and cuddle in a chair in the corner of an empty side room. I'm still being watched, but I can't help crying as more of the flood of memories comes back to me, and I feel like I'm the same age as I was then:

The people moan. Some scream. The brown walls close in around me. Wailing. *I've never heard wailing before. Why are there so many people?* The air reeks with the raw smell of unwashed people even though we had been hustled to another room. The walls are so brown. Brown walls. Brown people wailing. Brown floor.

I have a sty in my eye. Why, Mommy, did you put me in here? My eye hurts. I got a sty in my eye. It's a big red lump. It hurts. My brother is crying. Brown walls keep us closed in away from what I've just seen. What did I see? My mind hides from it. I saw a dead baby cradled in my horrified mother's arms. It was so skinny, like bony or something. Its eyes stuck out; big brown blank open eyes. It was floppy. *Go away from my mind, baby! Go away wailing people!* I want my Mommy to fix my eye but she is holding a dead baby.

I slide my hands slowly down the round palm stem walls. Shiny brown. They are shiny brown.

I hate hospitals. This room is dull gray. The walls are dull gray. The floor is dull gray. I wish I could go home. My eyes close and I fall asleep at last.

It is 3:00 am. I wake up with a start when the guards decide this is a convenient time to wake up all the patients and move them so they can vacuum the floor. *Why hasn't a doctor or nurse seen me yet, other than the ones that come by every two hours and take your vital signs?*

My mind is now in a whole different place. I feel silly sitting curled up in the corner where I fell asleep. But still, I start crying again, only this time my pain is different. As I close my eyes, memories that are of good things overwhelm me. I am crying, not for what happened, but for what I lost. I love the country I grew up in more than anything in the world and the loss of it is agonizing.

There is the rich clear ocean where we snorkeled for hours watching bright colored coral and fish, the white sand beaches and exotic shells.

There are perfect moments such as the time we found the marble entrance to the underground river and cave, and it was all different colors. There were the days of playing in the Rainforest River which was perfectly pristine with giant hornbills flying overhead and wild cockatoos doing their aerial dances, flying up over the ridge and dropping hundreds of feet. There were the shimmering butterflies and beautiful crystal rocks scattered all over the sand bars.

These memories still burn inside me. My therapist says I had an unnatural attachment to nature because the rest of my life was so unstable. Whatever it was, it hurts so much that I can't face it all. How long before I get well enough to do more to preserve it? I can't stand it here! I hate it here in the U.S. even after all these years! I feel so trapped! Or at least some of me does!

It is 3:20 AM and I am still waiting, but my tears are dried. I feel completely stable and can hardly remember why I came. I want the doctors to let me go. Suddenly an Intern calls my name at last...

"Let me see your shoulder. It says you were brought in because you cut on yourself?! Now why would you do that?"

Embarrassed I pull up my sleeve and show her the words "MY FAULT" carved carefully on the front of my shoulder with a razor blade. She looks it over and decides it doesn't need any stitches.

"You must hate yourself an awful lot to want to cut on yourself like that. Why do you think you do this?!" I shrug my shoulders.

"Are you seeing a therapist?"

"Yes, and I have a psychiatrist at MHMR."

"What is your official diagnosis?"

"Borderline ... Multiple Personalities..."

"Multiple Personalities?!" She exclaims. "What is that like? Do you have different names? Do you forget things? Is any part of you dangerous? You know most multiple personalities are really made up! How do you know yours aren't?"

This makes me furious! I forget her barrage of curious questions and zero in on the last two comments. She seems to be another "win" for the False Memory Syndrome Foundation, an organization mostly made up of accused sexual perpetrators. Multiple personalities are caused by severe trauma.

"Multiple personality disorder is not rare at all!" I snap back. "..Or made up! My husband is also MPD.

"Your husband also claims to have personalities?" She asks.

I knew I had lost her when I revealed that. She already believed the syndrome was rare, so how could two of them marry each other?

"Yes, he does, I'm afraid. Of course people often marry others with their same problems. They understand each other!" It was my best try.

"OK, let's get back to your paper work. I'm going to ask you to do a little test for me. Can you count backwards from 100 by 7s?"

I do this until she nods.

I want so badly for her to stop these silly tests and really understand something about me.

The nurse continues her series of inane questions...

"Do you know what year this is?"

"What month?"

"What day?"

"Who is the president?"

I rattle off the answers...

"The cops brought you down here? What about your husband?"

"He doesn't know what to do. The things I do scare him. He'd rather others take care of it."

"I can see why cutting on yourself would scare him. What if you cut a tendon? What if you got gangrene?"

I just laugh. If she had seen the cuts I've bandaged in the jungle where everything rots, she'd probably faint.

"Have you been to the hospital before?"

"Yes, I've been here seven times but only to the ER."

"OK. Are your brothers and sisters healthy?"

"No. I have two brothers and a sister. Two of them are as sick as I am. The third has had one brief but serious breakdown. That makes all of us. I guess something went wrong, huh!"

"Any other medical history we need to know about?"

"No" I want to go home.

"OK, well I'm going to get the Doc. I'll be back in just a minute so you stay right here. I don't know if I can let you go with your arm like that. Are you having any thoughts of suicide or hurting yourself right now?"

"No, I just want some sleep."

The Doc looks at my arm quickly. He says to the nurse, "A lot of borderlines do this to stop emotional pain. It's a primitive way of nurturing themselves when they didn't get enough as a child. Cutting produces norepinephrine, which is a natural painkiller and calms people down. Believe it or not most of them don't even feel a thing while they're doing it. Unfortunately, it's addictive. I've seen them much worse than this. There's nothing we can do for her at this point. She has a therapist and a doctor. I say we let her go."

"It's 4:00 AM, do I have to wake up my husband?"

"Yes, call your husband. When he gets here an orderly will get you past the doors and give you back your things."

My husband arrives and is not mad.

As I step back into the night air, I wonder if anything has been accomplished by my night in the Psych ER.