

= July 10, 1982 (Nine Days Before) =

I sighed and trudged yet again down the Athens General Hospital corridor, my still-unfamiliar stethoscope sliding around where I'd looped it around my uniform collar. Cardiac monitors dinged and glucose IV admin machines beeped from rooms on either side of the hallway. Plastic pill cup in hand, I knocked politely on the door of Room 337, two patient beds, part of my current rotation assignment. Hearing no answer, I opened it once more and approached the bed on the right, James Samperson. Age 87, diabetic, renal failure, multiple amputee due to circulation shutdown, do not resuscitate order on file. Prescriptions in his chart for Lasix and Digoxin and Lopressor and a few other such medical substances, none of which I'd managed to get him to swallow on my previous visit. Antiseptic whiff of Betadine overlaying a nasty undersmell of terminal organic rot.

"Mr. Samperson?", I said, peering around the edge of the plastic ceiling-hung privacy curtain. Mr. Samperson hadn't budged since I'd been here before, still glaring into the empty hospital air above his bed sheets, his dentureless lips pouting. He didn't acknowledge my presence, let alone confirm his identity, so as per protocols I once again turned the plastic arm band on his wrist to a position where I could read what was printed there. Yep, still him.

I'd thought of attempting to discuss his predicament with him, but the nursing supervisors don't like us to bring up death and dying if the patient hasn't done so first. And coming from me, a 23 year old white male nursing student intern in good health, it could come across as

absurd and pretentious: what could I possibly know about how it is for him?

“Mr. Samperson, your doctor prescribed the medications in this cup. And it’s my responsibility to bring them to you and explain what they’re for or answer any questions you’ve got...”

I stepped closer, into his space, watching his face. I spoke more quietly, “Will you take your medications? However you want to do this. I can give them to you one at a time, or all together... I have some of this applesauce, if that makes it easier to go down...?”

Lips compressed into a tight frown, Mr. James Samperson jerked his head an inch to the side, away from me. Then back, and repeat. *Uh uh. No.*

\* \* \*

“I *did* try again. He’s refusing. He’s not incompetent so we can’t make him. It’s not going to make any difference in his outcome. He’s dying. He knows it, his doctor knows it, we know it. It says so in his charts. This floor is where he’s been put to live his last days, and his dignity is all he’s got. He doesn’t want to take the pills.”

Ms. Thompson, my nursing instructor, did a long exhale and stared at me. She snatched the

pill cup from my hands and aimed the leading point of her nursing cap in a directional jerk, a familiar signal to follow her back down the hall. She entered 337 and chirped, “Mr. Samperson? Good afternoon, hon. Okay, we’re just going to swallow some pills, all right sweetie? This won’t take but a moment.” She pushed a finger past his tightened lips while pressing the edge of the plastic cup. His mouth opened and Ms. Thompson’s wrist tipped. In went the capsules. “Now let’s drink a little water, dear, so those won’t stick in your throat.” She poured a splash and he swallowed convulsively. “That’s good. Now you can get back to resting and we won’t bother you for awhile.” She looked over at my face. The message on hers was pretty plain: *See, now was that so hard?* “Now you need to get his bed sores treated and give him a bath and get some food into him. You saw what I did.”

“It’s not right to treat him like he’s a child. I’m not comfortable making him do things once he’s refused.”

“Well”, she said, “that’s going to be a problem.”

= July 11, 1982 (Eight Days Before) =

I pressed down on the wet brown mass of tea leaves with the back of the spoon. Additional rivulets of coppery brown concentrated tea ran down through the strainer and into the waiting glass pitcher. I’ve known some people who would wince if they saw me doing this, claiming it was making the brew bitter, but Grandma and Grandpa had been parents during the Great

Depression and this was how they wanted it done. You have to squeeze things and get more out of them.

I placed the tea pitcher on the dining table. "Can I do anything else?"

Grandma shook her head. "You go sit down and relax. There ain't nothin' else until these sweet potatoes get done. I'm just about to put some of those turnip greens on the stove to reheat and this kitchen don't have room for more than one person."

So I went back into the living room to hang out with Grandpa. He was eased back in the broad comfortable blond leather chair that had *always* been his chair, Grandpa's chair, as far back as I could remember. He was resting now, but had just come in from mowing the lawn about ten minutes ago. Something he officially had no business doing, not since his electrolytes got all messed up and he'd had to be hospitalized. His balance and his strength were still impaired and might never recover, and in theory I was here to take care of him, not just to be a freeloader living in their home. But Grandpa had decided that the handle of the lawnmower was about the same height as the grip of his walker, and would hold him up just fine while he pushed it around the yard.

Grandpa gave me a cheerful nod. He wasn't a person easily discouraged, not that he'd argue with anyone but you'd turn your back for a moment and he'd be out mowing the lawn. It's kind of hard to fault a 76 year old diabetic who'd rather behave like he was still alive and kicking than accept limitations.

"How was that? You feel okay?", I asked him.

"Tolerably well", he stated. "It's nice out. And how're you doing yourself?"

I gave a brief answer that skimmed over the complexity of that particular situation and sat back on the living room couch. Or, as my grandparents would refer to it, the *settee*.

I'm comfortable with companionable silence or conversation, but after a moment Grandpa leaned forward, rose, and switched on the television and it responded immediately with the cash-register dings and applause of *The Price is Right* so after a gameshow question or two I put on headphones and cued up some Rimsky-Korsakov to drown out the noise.

The phone rang. I didn't hear it right away over the strains of classical music. Grandma answered it and after a couple minutes called out to me. "Derek, it's Kate, wanting to talk to you." 'Kate' meaning my mom. Her daughter. I knew what this was about. Okay, let's get this over with. I accepted the sturdy black Bell Telephone receiver Grandma was offering me.

"Hi, Mama."

"Hi. Well...? Have you heard anything from them?"

"Yeah. They're suspending me from the nursing program. Ms. Thompson says if it were up to her, they'd see about letting me finish my clinical rotation at a different hospital, but her colleagues see me as not enough of a team player."

My Dad's voice broke in. "You don't know how sorry I am to hear this. I thought this was working for you, that for once you were going to finish something you had started and get on with your life. Now here we are again, and I just don't know what to do with you at this point." I visualized him on the other extension, probably the one in the bedroom while my Mom held the wall phone while seated in the kitchen. Parents with a mission to perform.

“I wish you’d never gotten involved with those people doing drugs”, my Mom sighed. “You used to be such a good student, and so responsible. Now I’m afraid you’ve damaged yourself to the point you can’t do anything any more.”

“That’s unfair! I told you what happened! I do fine in the classroom. I’ve got nearly perfect grades. And my patients like me, Ms. O’Neill used me as an example when she was discussing how to do the daily care, and my chart notes too, even Ms. Dixon says they’re detailed and clear and professional. The only problem is the same as before, I’m not comfortable treating patients like they don’t have any say-so about themselves. Last time it was a woman on postpartum who didn’t want a male nurse examining her episiotomy incision. Both times the nursing instructor said it’s part of the job, so just do it. Well, maybe it’s better to know going in, that I don’t *want* a job where I push people around!”

“I understand that”, Daddy replied, “but you have to find something! You can’t turn your nose up at everything and say it’s not for you! You’re 23 years old now. Do you realize that when I was that age, I was married and you’d already been born? I was taking on adult responsibility, and you need to do the same!”

Mama chimed in, “We’ve... we keep financing you for school. We paid for you to go to University of Mississippi and you dropped out. We paid for you to go to UNM even though it’s not the school we thought was best for you, and you got yourself kicked out. Now you’re suspended from the nursing program. It’s getting expensive and we’re not exactly getting any return on our investment!”

“That’s not fair either!”, I said, exhaling heavily. “I finished the auto mechanics school, and did my best to get jobs and support myself when I got out. And I didn’t ‘get myself kicked out’ at UNM. They had no right to sign me into that place, I hadn’t done anything to hurt anyone or threaten anyone, it was all a misunderstanding and it wasn’t my fault!”

“Nothing ever is, is it?”

Daddy interceded. “I don’t think it’s productive to talk about blame and fault, that’s not the point. We need to think about what’s next. We’re not giving up on you but we can’t just keep repeating the same things that didn’t work the first time and expecting different results.”

Mama said, “Mother says you’re a real help around the house and you’ve been taking care of your Grandpa a lot better than the home attendants ever did, so you’re pulling your weight, and I’m glad you’re there with them, they need you. But we were so hopeful that you’d turn this into an opportunity and that nursing would suit you. We love you and we want what’s best for you. We’re just frustrated because we don’t know what that is.”

= July 13, 1982 (Six Days Before) =

I’d been prescribed another dose of telephone.

There’s a phone alcove in my grandparents’ home, a recessed area in the hallway. It’s shallow, not like a room you can go into to be on the phone, but just a wooden stand built into an

indentation in the wall, with a shelf for the phone to sit on, and under it, behind a hinged wooden lattice, room for phone books and note pads and pencils. I lurked there all morning and early afternoon. One thing that occurred to me was to be the one to place the call. To be less passive and less acted upon.

Yeah, but... Grandpa and Grandma's phone bill. Not mine.

I played absent-mindedly with the rotary dial. Metal, not plastic, that dial, painted black but with shiny silvery finger holes, stiff spring, and you can sort of feel the pulses. A serious black vintage machine.

A measured ding, ding, ding chimed from Grandpa's mantelpiece clock.

Phone finally rang.

"Your father and I have been looking at some materials and talking for some time now with some other families. And we have a proposal we'd like you to consider. Don't answer until you've heard the whole thing, because we've put some serious thought into it. All right?"

"That's reasonable. Okay, go ahead"

"There's a program center just outside Houston we think looks promising, with counseling and activities to help people who are trying to get away from their drug or alcohol problem..."

I winced, but kept my silence.



“...not just about drugs, though. They look into a person’s diet and see how it fits with their metabolism and whether people are getting all the vitamins and minerals and components for making the right amino acids for mental functioning, and they do something called biofeedback so that... let’s say somebody had a hot temper, which is not a problem that you have, but someone else, biofeedback can help you choose your reactions and learn how to think more calmly before you act. Or someone who kind of acts impulsively, I think you maybe do that on occasion.”

My dad added, “It’s not just about possible problems with your brain itself. I know you’re not inclined to think there’s anything wrong with how your mind works, and I suspect you’re mostly right about that. But they also work on communication skills. Being in a group. Developing habits that make it easier to participate instead of sticking out and not fitting in. They know that some people who are struggling are those who have never become comfortable socially, and they want to help them deal with that.”

Now *that* sounded interesting. *It’s not that I want to become one of the group-belonging, fitting-in-mentality kind of people, but I’d like to at least pick up their skillset as a second language.*

“I knew it was going to be hard to sell you on the idea of a therapeutic service after what happened to you at UNM”, he continued. “Kate shouldn’t have said what she said the other day about you getting yourself kicked out. I agree they had no justifiable reason for putting you into that place, and frankly I didn’t realize they still had those medieval snake pit places, locking people up and pumping them full of drugs and not trying to help them! That’s not therapy!”

Mama said, “This isn’t like that. Their brochure shows the staff and the patients and everyone is wearing regular clothes, no medical uniforms or hospital pajamas or anything like that. It’s a very modern place where they respect patients, or clients, I’m not sure which term they use, but it says if anyone doesn’t feel they’re getting any good from it, it’s all voluntary, and you can just sign out and leave.”

“But we’d want you to give it a real try”, my Dad noted. “Don’t stalk out the first time you think there’s some policy or some person that isn’t perfect. You won’t get anything out of it unless you go in *intending* to get something out of it.”

“They won’t try to put you on those horrible psychiatric drugs,” my Mom added. “They don’t believe in drugging people. In fact, they want to get everyone *off* drugs.”

“This all sounds good”, I admitted. “Yeah, I mostly don’t think I have the problems you think I do, but it sounds like they’re willing to look at everything. I have problems that come from...you know, always being an unpopular kid, things... that I *do* guess get in my way now that I’m trying to reach out to people and make a difference. I don’t feel like either of you two really understand that for the last two years, the most important thing to me has been to share some of my own understandings and connect with people. I want to have a social impact. I think I have some really important insights that could help other people. Those things about growing up as a heterosexual sissy that I’ve been trying to tell you about.”

“You know”, my mom replied, “you keep obsessing about things that most people aren’t comfortable discussing. Personal, private things. When I was your age, that wasn’t an appropriate topic for conversation! Doesn’t it ever occur to you that there’s probably something

unhealthy about focusing on the same things, when so much of it is all in your past anyway?”

I played with the coiled black telephone cord, sticking my fingers through the stretchy loops. “I think it’s pretty normal for a person to keep going back to the same ideas”, I said. “Maybe they’re on the verge of a breakthrough, like a deeper understanding. I bet if you could listen in to a person’s brain you’d find that they return to a lot of the same stuff and keep digging into it.”

I closed my eyes for a moment and rubbed them. Rubbed at memories and visions that lurked perpetually behind my eyelids. I continued, “It’s been frustrating so far trying to talk to people about any of that stuff. And if I got to the point of feeling like I had any traction with that, I’d probably be less distracted from everyday things. Like getting along better with hospital staff, maybe. Yeah, since I’m not in the nursing program any more, I suppose this is a good time to give this kind of thing a try.”

= July 19, 1982 (Day One) =

Instead of the limousine driver I'd been led to expect, I am met at the gate by a blue-shirted Houston Airport staffer. "Derek Turner? We have a message for passenger Derek Turner?" I wave broadly to indicate that that's me.

"You're supposed to call this number collect when you arrive." I'm handed a sheet of paper.

I go to the bank of pay phones and soon find myself talking to a receptionist from Elk Meadow Clinical Retreat. "There's a problem with the limousine being able to bring you here, so you're supposed to hire a taxi and the hospital will pay the charges when you get here."

So after I claim my suitcase, I make my way to the taxi stand and explain the situation. The taxi service wants to confirm so I give them the telephone number. The dispatcher walks over to one of the cabs and talks with the driver, then waves me towards him. "Okay, it's all set. This is Ben, he'll take you there."

I climb across the cracked ochre vinyl of the back seat and the driver pulls out into traffic. "Where ya from?"

"Athens Georgia"

"Visiting, vacation, or business?"

"I guess it falls into business. I'm here for a few counseling sessions and some kind of workup."

Ben is more inclined to chatter than I am; I answer his questions but I don't fill any silences and after awhile the conversation sort of languishes.

My mind drifts as I stare out the window but we keep making turns and merging onto highways, then down offramps and roads with storefront businesses and stoplights, then back onto highways, and it seems like we've been doing this for a very long time. I find myself tapping my fingers impatiently on the crumbling foam of the armrest. I check my watch and it's been over forty-five minutes.

"How much farther is this place?"

"Oh, we're pretty close now", the driver reassures me. He aims the car onto another exit ramp; the seatbelt tightens annoyingly around my shoulder and I reposition it. From the highway signs I see through the window, this guy Ben is putting us on interstate spur 610. Again. I recognize a water tower and a big red sign advertising a car wash I've seen earlier.

"Excuse me, I'm sorry to ask but are you clear on how to get to this place? We seem to be driving in circles."

"It's a little confusing. The road I thought would take us there doesn't have a turnoff. Don't worry, I'll get you there." Ben's eyes reflect in the mirror, meltingly apologetic, his smile obsequious and subservient.

I watch the pine-tree air freshener below the rear-view mirror dance on its string. Beneath Ben's ingratiating mannerisms, I sense a hardness. Or maybe I just sense my own splitting headache and it's adding to what was already a bad mood.

Another fifteen minutes go by. This time it's a residential street, with a bank on one corner

and a church with scaffolding around it that I'm sure I've seen before. I sigh. "Do you maybe want to call in and get directions? I'm not sure we're making progress."

Ben picks up the dark grey cube and mashes the talk button and waits. I hear a tinny voice identifying that it's the dispatcher. "Hey, Arnie, what's the best way to get to Elk Meadow at 441 West Wichita Springs Road? I'm on 225 business loop..."

"Yeah, stay on until you get past all those dealerships, you want exit..."

The driver confirms and puts the radio back in its cradle and drives. We pass some automotive dealerships and a big Baptist Church, then he's driving for awhile without making any exit. There are end-of-highway signs indicating we need to pick between 146 north and 146 south. The sun is low in the sky, orange and bright. Be getting dark pretty soon.

"Maybe I should have just tried to hitchhike", I say.

"Aww man, don't say that. I told you I'd get you there..." Ben picks up the radio transmitter again and tells Arnie he never saw the exit, and they argue over the radio. The dispatcher gives Ben new instructions and again the radio goes into the cradle and Ben makes some cloverleaf transfers and reversals and after awhile we're back on 225.

Finally we take a series of turns into suburbia and the taxi pulls up to a big glass-windowed office building. A woman in a beige business suit comes out and hands a credit card to the driver and signs the form.

I wonder cynically if Ben was trying to run up the charges and figured the hospital would pay the tab without blinking. I wonder even more cynically if this could all be a standard hazing ritual associated with arrival at the institution. But there's that Hanlon's razor thing, you know,

“never attribute to malice that which can be adequately explained by incompetence” or however it’s worded. Ben strikes me as hard and manipulative but it could all just be his coping mechanism, a cab driver who gets a lot of cranky passengers.

Elk Meadow Hospital turns out to be a modern office complex, it doesn’t have that ominous psychiatric-institutional look. Lots of glass in the doors, a single-story building with wide corridors, acoustic tiles and fluorescent lights in the ceiling like office buildings.

I follow Beige Business Suit down a corridor and she waves me in to an office. “This is Turner”, she tells the fellow behind the desk, a bored-looking thirty-some-odd wearing glasses with heavy black frames. She hands him forms. “Should be the last admit for today”.

Like her, Desk Official Guy doesn’t bother providing his identity. Wants mine, though, even though he should have that already. “Last name? First name? Date of birth?...” He has an open manila folder in front of him and fills out forms with a pen as I answer.

I have to take a rather large battery of intake tests. The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI). Rorschach test. Oral exam asking me questions about my experiences.

The MMPI test I have to complete on my own, a really long set of statements I have to mark “yes” or “no” to. The guy in the black glasses goes back to doing his own paperwork while I deal with it. A lot of them are the same question, just slightly reworded: “I am bothered by an upset stomach a lot”; “I have a great deal of stomach trouble”; “I get a discomfort in my stomach every few days”. I wonder if they think we won’t notice and will answer differently the second or third time. Or for that matter that we *will* notice and deliberately answer differently the

second or third time. There are also a lot of questions that could be interpreted in a lot of different ways. It feels impersonal and I don't like the idea of being evaluated with such a clumsy tool.

The oral exam is impersonal too. The guy looks over the top of the paper he's reading from and asks me questions, some of them intrusive like "Have you ever wanted to touch someone you just met?" and he only wants yes or no answers and doesn't react to anything I say and doesn't want to discuss any of it.

Finally, finally, he finishes with me. A tall guy with a goatee, wearing a screen-printed Bachman-Turner Overdrive in Concert t-shirt comes in and introduces himself as Joe, says he's a resident here just like me and will show me around the place. He shakes my hand, asks my name and how I'm doing so far.

"Okay I guess", I reply. "Seems kind of institutional and impersonal", I add.

"Yeah, I s'pose it could feel like that when you first get here. It's really not, though. Trust me on this. You're gonna get the most hands-on personal experience you ever dreamed of. This place is the real deal, man". He grins at me and waves at me to follow him down the hallway.

Surprisingly, rock music is playing on the public speakers — Boston's "More Than a Feeling." Joe tells me it's really nice here, he is really getting his life together. He takes me down a corridor. The walls are painted solid green up to knee level then pale green with abstract flowers and cheerful insects. Joe indicates a large room beyond an open double door as we come to it. "This is where we do group therapy. I learned so much about myself in there. They really make you think." He leads me farther down the hall. "This is where they do biofeedback. It's



pretty cool. They hook you up to all kinds of electrodes and you focus on your mood and thinking and how it affects your tension and rate of digestion and stuff like that.” Around a corner. “We have meetings in there. Everyone gets to talk about their observations on everyone else’s progress, and if anyone has a conflict with other people here, we air it out in there, don’t just carry it around inside you, you know. And everyone has a say in how everyone else’s progress is assessed.” We walk farther on. The linoleum tile squares on the floor have intermittent red or black squares among the grey ones. “Down this row are the individual counselors. Everyone has an assigned individual counselor to help you focus directly on your issues. I’ve got Gary, Gary Stevens, that’s his door there. They’re good. If you have a problem getting the hang of life in here, and sometimes some people find it’s a bit of an adjustment, your individual counselor is like the person you go to. They’ll help you.” Gary’s door, like the others, has his nameplate in black, his name carved in white letters.

Joe points to a pair of conference rooms. “Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meet in there. I didn’t realize I had a drug problem when I first came here, but you learn a lot about yourself in this place. After you’ve been here awhile you’ll find yourself saying you used to think this or you used to think that but that here in Elk Meadow you really got to understand yourself.” Another big room. “Audio visual taping in there. Psychodrama. You’ll be participating in psychological reenactments that they help you set up, and acting through your issues. It’s good. You get to see your own behavior in a whole new way. They make you think about yourself here.” At the end of the corridor are more doors with plaques attesting to the identity of the person occupying the office. “The doctors. That one’s James Barnes, he’s the one

who runs all this. They're really smart. Dr. Barnes in particular. They're saving people in this place, from the streets, from themselves. You come in here thinking you don't need saving. Maybe you've already been saved by the Lord Jesus Christ or you've been saved by that extra hit you've got stashed away with your works in the bottom of your backpack just for when you need it, or you've been saved by making it into Who's Who or the Fortune 500, you and your stock portfolio and maybe your ivory cocaine straw, you know what I mean? But we all came in here thinking we knew a lot of things that were not quite so, and then everyone's looking at you and saying 'I used to think that too, before I came to Elk Meadow' and after awhile you have to take time to reexamine. I've had to jettison a lot of bullshit things I used to say and believe."

Joe steers me around another corner and we're pretty much back where we'd started. A very composed woman, somehow compact without being small, bobbed brown hair, stands waiting. "This is Emily, she's a Unit Leader. How long you been a Unit Leader, huh, Emily?" Emily smiles and says this is her second month. Joe finishes, "She's going to show you some other stuff."

Emily nods to me. "The facility here is divided up into sections. Your Unit Leader is responsible for paying attention to the feedback you get at group and at community meeting and sticking with you and helping you integrate that. You might not always like what you hear. It might make you feel uncomfortable. How you feel is one thing, and you got to own your feelings, but they can get in your way and keep you from hearing what you need to hear. If you aren't feeling so good about how things are going, your unit leader will notice and help you with that. Second to your individual counselor, your Unit Leader is the person who's going to be

there for you. And you'll be a Unit Leader yourself at some point."

Joe adds, "It's a lot of responsibility and you've got to show that you understand the goals of the process here, but one of the ways you show that you're making progress and taking your own life situation seriously is by participating, we believe in that here. We have to be here for each other. It's not always easy but it's always a brand new day and a new chance, you know what I mean?"

Emily takes over and leads me on a tour of the living quarters. "You'll be staying in a room like this. You'll have a roommate, I don't know who yet. It's not very fancy but there's storage space under the beds, those are drawers that pull out. It's not a very big space and you can keep it picked up and get your bed made, people like to see that you've bothered to keep your personal area straightened up, little tip. I'm no June Cleaver but I always make my bed and straighten up in the mornings because you want your space to look like a reflection of your focus. It looks good."

"I'm not clear... are you part of the staff?", I ask, "because if you are, you're the first one to really interact with me."

"I'm a resident, I'm here on the same basis that you are", she tells me. "We have responsibilities in this place, and being Unit Leader is mine at the moment, which includes participating in giving you this tour."

She takes me out to the cafeteria area. "You get something to eat on your way here, I hope? The kitchen's closed, I'm afraid, but there's some snacks and fruit."

"I ate in the Atlanta airport before my flight," I say.

“When I first came here it was sort of my habit to sit by myself and be by myself. I would come in here and get my lunch or supper and go sit by myself and try to withdraw. The thing is, there’s so much therapeutic work that keeps going, really eye-opening experiences that you don’t want to miss out on, and once I had been here awhile I came to realize all that withdrawing was getting in the way of my personal growth, and I needed to see how everyone else was doing here in the program, you know we all participate with each other and we have to be here for each other, and after I had been here awhile I began to realize how much I was missing out if I didn’t stay connected.”

We walk down a short hall. I notice a little alcove off to the left side with a spinet piano and make note of it for later.

Emily directs me outside, through a pair of pneumatic-bar doors, into a courtyard area that opens up into some kind of sports fields. “We come out here once a day for recreation. I’m sure you’ve heard ‘a healthy mind in a healthy body’. It’s true. People who don’t get exercise dwell on their problems instead of solving them. Before I came to Elk Meadow I was never much of an athlete or active person, but I’ve discovered that I can pitch a baseball pretty decently.” She leads me back in and turns me over to the next person, Gary Stevens, Joe’s individual counselor.

“The important thing”, Gary tells me, “is that you want a fresh start. It’s your life, dude. You gotta reclaim it. You got a safe place here to rethink what you came in with, stuff that ain’t working for you, and find yourself some new paths. I like my work here, man. I take the people who get assigned to me and help them let go of what’s holding them back and give them a push in the right direction. If you can start over fresh, it’s gonna be new chances and new

opportunities all across the board. It takes a lot of courage and that's why we're here, no one should have to do this alone. When people first come to Elk Meadow they're all dominated by who they've been before, know what I mean? That gets in the way of them having an opportunity to go past who they've been and reach out and embrace the possibilities. After you've been here a little awhile, you're gonna find yourself saying 'Wow, I never realized how much I was a prisoner of my own past'. You are, you know. The sooner you realize that, the sooner you can move on past it. Not be chained up by it, huh? Get yourself a new chance."

Several other residents come out and introduce themselves to me: April, Ellen, Jake ... everyone is smiling and chatting up a storm. There's a lot of enthusiasm for the program. They ask if I've eaten and then take me to the cafeteria as they continue the conversation. "A lot of us, when we first came here, like Ellen here, we'd had a lot of bad experiences with 'programs' and we didn't expect to get much out of it, did we?" Ellen, who has a sort of pinched-off scrunched-in face, takes the cue, "Yeah, I had been in a lot of things, things I got put into, things I put myself into, and it was all like 'You're a loser', but then I got in here and everyone believed in me and said I could be a winner, I can be anything I want."

I'm not good at learning new people's names, especially if they're easily mixed up. *Okay, Ellen is this one, with the pinched-looking face, Emily's the one I mistook for a staffer earlier.*

The residents are all very animated, trading off telling their stories and radiating real awe for the place. I can't match them for energy, can scarcely pay attention at all at this point, I want to sleep. They escort me back to the wing and stand around close to the nurse's station, an area set

apart by a rounded-edged partition at waist height and a door. I get introduced to the evening shift nurse, who, exactly as advertised, is wearing casual street clothes, and she says hello to me with a welcoming smile. She asks me to fill out a cumbersome array of additional medical forms. Every medical doctor under whose care I had ever received any form of treatment, and where and when and for what. Release of information permission forms. It goes on for pages and pages. “I could have done this a lot easier if you folks had let me know to bring this information with me”, I grumble. Then I have to pee in a cup for them. Then get blood drawn.

Afterward the residents take me to my room and sit on my roommate’s bed and hang out talking. I am told that my roommate has just been discharged and so I will have the room to myself for probably a couple of days. There is a lot of discussion of former residents and what they had been like and when they had graduated out of Elk Meadow, and how they are probably doing now.

I feel seriously exhausted and darkly annoyed. I was on a long-delayed plane flight, already tired and irritable by the time I landed in Houston. Then I was driven around in circles by an incompetent taxi driver. Then a long long barrage of tests with me answering questions yes or no. Then this neverending tour. I’ve now been here for hours and not once has anyone asked me to talk about myself and what brought me here and what I was interested in getting out of the experience. I feel drowned in “*WE*”. ‘*WE*’ felt this way before we came to the great and wonderful Elk Meadow Hospital. ‘*WE*’ all had certain personal behaviors and then we came to realize they were not in our best interests. ‘*WE*’ had had all kinds of bad habits that we came to

realize had to be abandoned if we were going to get the full advantages of Elk Meadow. I feel like I haven't spoken twelve syllables except while answering the test questions. I feel assaulted. I need a chance to talk back. There's a 'ME' that the 'WE' in this place are going to be hearing from. Tomorrow...

= July 20, 1982 (Day Two) =

It takes me a couple beats to figure out what bed I've awakened in. Clinically austere room, particle-board side table, a chest of drawers into which I'd unpacked my clothes. Oh yeah. Elk Meadow Hospital. The clinic place. *God that was a long day, yeesh, what a way to start a therapeutic retreat, huh?*

I dive into a long hot shower, steaming up the tiny bathroom, stretching and inhaling the steam. The needles of water feel good on the back of my neck and shoulders. Towel off and fetch undies and socks and a fresh t-shirt. Consider wearing the same jeans, then decide to start fresh there too. Transfer wallet and keys and pocketwatch and belt.

I meander out into the hallway. A blue Smurf waves to me from the cheerfully painted mural on the wall. Heart's "Even it Up" plays from the institutional speakers. Undeniably a different ambience than any psychiatric hospital I've ever seen, either as a nursing student or as a patient.

I smell bacon frying and follow my nose towards the dining room, get handed a tray, pick out scrambled eggs, bacon, hash browns. No Tabasco sauce available. Shake a bunch of black pepper onto my eggs instead. Coffee. Mmm.

“Oh, there you are”, greets a guy in his mid-30s. Broad hand forward for a handshake. Blond hair blow-dried to the side, off-center red tie, friendly grin. “You’re Derek, right? I’m Mark Raybourne. I’ll be your personal counselor. I have a schedule for you”.

Mark hands me a sheet of paper with a grid of boxes. Weekdays listed along the top. Hours on the left. “This column is today. Morning meeting is in an hour so you’ve got time to eat and relax. Did Emily show you where the unit meeting room is? Down that hall and second door on your right. You have me after that, I’ll come get you. Then you have recreation with Joanne. And so on, you see the room numbers here and the times over here, just like school, right?”

I study the schedule. Yeah, a lot like school, except that in high school you get to go home at three o’clock, and even in college you don’t usually enroll in an array of classes that occupy the whole day without interruption. Mark gives my shoulder a pat and departs; I finish my breakfast.

\* \* \*

“Good morning, Unit Two! How are we feeling?” The chirpy redhead leans forward into the microphone. “Turn to your left and high-five your neighbor! Now turn to your right and pass it on!”

I can play along. We all whack hands in mid-air.

“Thank you, Irma”, says an elegant guy with salt-and-pepper hair, attired in a maroon sports



jacket. He seems to be in charge. He has an animated face...something about his eyes and eyebrows seem to be full of inquiry as he looks around the room. *Well? Well?* He is smiling. He dominates the room, and people who I gather are staff seem happy to accede to that. Whoever he is, this is his show and he's got a following.

"Let's start with the personal accomplishments", he says. "Moving to first tier we have Miriam, Valerie, and Richard. You have made amazing progress these last few weeks."

He slows his pace and puts his hand to his chin for a moment. "Valerie... Miss 'Somebody Else Broke Me So They're the Ones Responsible for Fixing Me'... you're learning to take responsibility for your life, but you still resent it. At least you're listening. It gets better, I promise."

Valerie, who is about my age with spiked black hair, is glaring; her mouth is pinched on one side. I think she's going to respond, but she doesn't.

"Also in motion we have Ellen, who has fought hard to reach this point, haven't you? And John B., who's been digging in. Welcome to second tier. Congratulations to the new third tier people, too, I apologize if I don't call all of your names at this time, but you've made the transition to becoming a part of our community, and all of you deserve applause for deciding to make a go of it here."

"Dr. Barnes", says the perky redheaded person who apparently is Irma, "I think we should ask them all to stand and be recognized for their accomplishments."

Dr. Barnes grins and waves upwards and a multitude of people stand. Someone starts applauding and it catches on. Barnes is amazingly expressive with his shoulders, his eyebrows,

those gesturing hands.

“I want to welcome the new people joining us today”, he proclaims. “You’ve made a deeply personal decision to work on your own selves and become who you were intended to be. It won’t be easy but it is brave and you won’t be alone.”

An announcement is made that people coming or going through the south hall should be cautious because it was on the schedule for being mopped and polished today. Someone lost a keyring, please return it if you find it.

\* \* \*

“Come on in”, Mark Raybourne says, indicating the chairs in front of his desk. He's scribbling notes on a ledger but leaves it sitting on his desk. He rises and comes around to sit at the other chair in front, resting his hands on his knees, smiling. “I appreciate you coming on time. So... mostly I’m your person for when it makes more sense to talk one on one instead of in a group. That can be when you just want to ask for a day pass or anything that doesn’t really involve the others, or it can be something where it feels too personal to talk about yet in front of other people.”

I nod. “That makes sense. So far my only major concern is that I feel like everyone is telling me exactly how it’s going to be for me here and what I’m going to discover about myself, but no one has asked me about what I came here for, or what *I* want from the program. It’s getting

rather irritating. But I did just get here.”

“Yeah, I guess it can seem that way when you first arrive. There is a lot of focused activity, a lot of structure that you might not be used to in your everyday life.”

“Well, not this specific structure, that’s for sure. I was recently in a nursing program with classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays and practical rotation at the hospital on other days, so I’m used to schedules and timeframes and due dates for things and all that.”

While I was speaking, Mark was removing his glasses with one finger, after which he pulled out a shirt tail, and is now wiping smudges from the lenses.

“I saw that when I was reading your admission survey. You were studying to be an RN?”

“No, just an LPN. Although I was open to going back for the RN later if it worked out.”

“But it didn’t? You dropped out or got expelled from the program or something like that?”

“Yeah, exactly. I discovered that I like patients, I like learning biology and medicine, and I mostly get along with other nursing staff and aides...but I don’t much care for hospitals.”

Mark replaces his glasses on his nose. “So did you show up impaired? Miss class because of blackouts?”

“No, but I was expected to find a way to make patients accept treatment when they were refusing, and we got into an argument about the ethics of that.”

“Do you tend to be hot-tempered and get into a lot of arguments with people?”

“I don’t think I’m at all the temper tantrum type. I am stubborn and passionate about things, and my...I had a girlfriend who told me once that my mind keeps on making unexpected left-hand turns without signaling first.”

“Girlfriend, huh? Were you about to say something else?”

“Well, we’re kind of off-again, on-again. She lives in New Mexico and I’ve been in Georgia for the last year and a half. And we’re not exclusive.”

“Uh huh. I saw from your admissions survey that you’ve had sex with men?”

“I remember that question. That’s the kind of thing I was talking about. Someone just arrives here and immediately they’re filling out pages and pages of forms with all these really personal questions on them, and none of them are about ‘Hey, what brings you here?’, so it feels kind of dehumanizing.”

“Some people will say ‘girlfriend’ or use ‘she’ as a way to avoid people’s attitudes if they find out they sleep with men.”

“Aah... no, the person who made the left-hand turns comment about how my mind works is an actual female person, I didn’t invent her or anything. I don’t have any sexual encounters with male people, I mean I tried it. I’d been accused of it all my life so I was already paying the price of people’s attitudes whether I did it or not, but I didn’t much care for it. I actually don’t tend to like men very often as people. The person I tried it with was my best friend in junior high and high school, one of the exceptions. Problem is, I don’t really care much for male bodies and their shapes and smells. I don’t mean like they’re icky or repellent, but they don’t do anything for me in an appetite way.”

“But when you’re a bit strung out and that’s what’s available, it sometimes happens, huh?”

“Umm... are you asking whether I have a substance abuse problem? You’ve kind of made several allusions in that direction.”

“Well, you gotta look at it this way... being a man is a lot about seizing your own fate, and choosing what you want to do, what’s best for you. One problem with drugs is that it interferes with that, because it messes with your clear-headedness, and that makes you vulnerable. You end up with things happening that maybe aren’t what you want. Maybe under the influence you aren’t so picky, or you look around and things are happening to you and you just don’t care and you let it happen.”

“I don’t consider myself to have a drug problem. I drink beer and smoke pot on weekends and I like to drop acid on occasion, but I don’t have any sense that I’m careening out of control and smashing up my own life or anything. And also I’m not into that whole ‘be a man’ thing, all obsessed with control. I think my sexuality is like that of a woman, my personality as well, I call myself a heterosexual sissy. Or a straightbackwards person, because in my relationships with women I’m not usually the butch.”

“Maybe that’s something you could work on here. Put that behind you.”

“Why would I want to do that? It’s not a problem in need of fixing.”

“Well, I think this has given both of us a lot of material, a lot of things to think about. I have a clearer sense of you now that I’ve met you. I look forward to our next session.”

Mark gets up from his chair so I do as well, and we walk down the hall corridor together, rubber-soled shoes making squeaks on the freshly polished linoleum. “Is that more or less the usual amount of time for these individual sessions?”, I ask him.

“Yeah, man, it’s not like psychoanalysis, I’m not going to ask you about how your Mom weaned you or what you thought about your potty training. It’s just a chance to say ‘So how’s it

going' and, you know, if you want to air some grievances or you got something on your mind."

"Fair enough. Hey, if I'm going to recreation, where do I actually go?"

"Right out through those double doors. You'll see some people already hanging out, and Joanne will be out momentarily. See you later on."

\* \* \*

The patchy lawn descends between brick walls down to a sidewalk and an assortment of concrete areas with painted lines on them, I'm guessing for handball or some similar sport. Tufts of grass grow between the sidewalk panels.

One of the female residents I'd been introduced to during my walking tour of Elk Meadow Hospital yesterday is there, I remember her chain that made me think about bikers, a chain from her back pocket wallet to her belt. Dark hair. Denim jacket with the arms chopped off at the seam. Lots of metal embedded in her belt. She's speaking to the large jowly guy, the one who tends to speak with a boomy voice, Jake, I think.

"Where'd you just come from?", she's asking him. "You havin' it out with Stevens?"

"Fuck no, I don't give a shit about Stevens. I just got out of bio kickback. Just starin' at the lines on the screen and kickin' back." Jake hooks his thumbs into his belt loops and closes his eyes and leans his head back self-indulgently. Jake occupies space, horizontally and vertically. Confident and casual, a muscular Pillsbury doughboy looming over everyone else.

Biker Mama gives me a brief nod as I approach. “Hey. You look like you’re still adjusting to arrival.” I nod back.

Jake acknowledges me too. “Umm. David? No, Daryl, right?”

“Close. Derek. And you’re Jake?”

“Yep, sure am. This is April, and here comes Ronald. I bet you like rock music, huh?”

“Yeah, totally”, I confirm. “Led Zeppelin, Heart, Pink Floyd, all that album oriented rock.”

“I figured, because you got the hair. I once had mine that long.”

The person identified as Ronald says “Hi” to April; then to Jake and me, joining the conversation, “Yeah, it looks cool when it’s long, but that’s also not the best way to stick with winners.”

He sizes me up for a moment. “You just got here, didn’t you? You probably never thought about it this way, but, see, you wear your hair like that so you can fit in with people who use drugs, so it’s a dead giveaway about where your head is at.”

I am annoyed again, but he isn’t entirely wrong and I decide I’ll acknowledge that even if he does seem to be trying to pick a quarrel about it. “I had my hair short all through high school, but the group of people I drifted towards, who seemed to accept me best, were the town potheads. And I associated smoking pot with having long hair, and rock music and the ideas about a counterculture, so it all kind of fit together.” I run my fingers through my hair, shaking it out and tossing my head at the same time. Flouncy Derek, luxuriating in my appearance. “But the other part of it was that I associated it all with gentle peaceful guys, and with sex that wasn’t all grabby and aggressive, all that peace and harmony stuff. Later on, I realized I didn’t fit in

with the countercultural guys either, but I still like the long hair because it's pretty, and I still fit better with the longhaired guys than with the ones who cut it short, for lots of reasons."

"If drugs isn't the center focus of your life, you could get rid of that. Brand yourself to the world as somebody who's ready to straighten out and fly right." Ronald has sandy brown hair with little waves in it. Tall narrow face, horse face with a long flat nose. He'd look better if he grew his hair out. And it sounds like he's reading from a script and not even adjusting it to what I actually say in response to it.

I point to April with my thumb. "My hair's about the same length as hers. That's what I like about it. It's a way of saying I got a lot in common with the women. If she can have her hair long and not be accused of having it long to get drugs, I get to have mine long too, or else you're being sexist about it."

"That's bullshit and you know it. It's different for girls."

"Hey folks", calls out a young woman in a track suit, walking towards us with a ball bat and and softball. Ellen, about thirty, the resident from yesterday with the short chopped hair and a tight face, is walking with her, carrying a pasteboard box with equipment, gloves and things.

The woman in the track suit announces, "I'm Joanne, for those who don't know me. I guess actually that's just you," she finishes, nodding at me.

"Derek. Hi."

She shifts to addressing us all. "Let's give it a few more minutes to see if we get some more people, but I thought we'd do a few innings of softball. We can double up on some positions, catcher and outfielders, and just play for fun, if we don't have enough for teams."



Ellen stands close to April. “Hey”, April says.

“Hey.”

Joanne returns to speaking directly to me. “Dr. Barnes likes us to get exercise and do some playing, he says if a person puts their focus on sorting out their situation and processing what they’re feeling and tries to do all that indoors in chairs and couches, it’s like a bottleneck, you get a lot of tension that gets corked up and it’s got to come out if you want to stay relaxed enough to make progress”.

“That makes all kinds of sense”, I say. “I’ve read about holistic health and mind-body-spirit, ... I like to go for long walks, it’s my favorite way of letting stuff in the back of my head sort itself out.”

Behind Joanne, April is asking Ellen something quietly; I don’t catch all the words but from fragments and how they hold themselves, their body language, I think maybe April is asking Ellen if it’s all right or she’s all right or if she is doing okay — that kind of question. Some of that tightness leaves Ellen’s face. It’s a nice face, a sort of pixie face, the kind that can be expressive when it’s not walled off.

Softball isn’t one of my favorites. I’m not very good at most things that involve aiming and throwing or catching. I stand out in the field to try to intercept the ball if someone hits it my way, and I take my turn swinging badly at the pitch. Part of the purpose, of course, is to get us talking and interacting, relaxed with each other, and I try not to let my dislike for the sport get in

the way of that, but I'm also not very good at casual chatter with people I don't really know yet. It always seems like so much of it is geared towards reassuring the other people that you're just like they are, and I don't like to pretend that I am. I mean, I am in at least some ways with most people, but we kind of have to compare notes before we discover those points in common, and in lots of other ways I'm atypical. I think at a certain point in a person's life, if they have a few too many odd corners and strange surfaces, they stop aspiring to blend in and just accept that they're different, and after that they have less resistance to anything in themselves that's also different.

Anyway, I chime in a few times, agreeing or adding some comment of my own, but mostly I just kind of hang out there not being very interactive and also not getting much exercise, and thinking I'd really rather have some time to go off on a long walk and think about things.

\* \* \*

Next on the schedule is psychodrama. I walk down the hallway looking for the room I was shown yesterday, looking for the door with the matching room number. The PA system speakers play a very contagious rock piece, "Jack and Diane" by John Cougar. Song about a lot of optimism and courage and "you and me against the world" spirit that doesn't take them very far, so kind of a sad song, but touching since at least here's a song about them, celebrating them anyway.

On the wall is a mural I've passed a few times, and I pause to take it in more closely. An angry elk glaring out from the painting, actually snorting steam or smoke from its nostrils. "ELK

MEADOW” painted in a loop above it. “NO DRUGS” in a parallel loop below.

Very macho. An elk you shouldn’t fuck with, an elk to be reckoned with. All that “I am so domineering and in charge because of what I can do to the rest of you if you challenge me” stuff just turns me off. Shouldn’t people coming to a place like this get encouraged to be vulnerable and take the risk of trusting instead of lured into snorting smoke and menacing people with their horns?

Psychodrama is another large room with a stage and they have video recorders and tape recorders all over the place. Make movies about your life. The person on the hot seat is April. It sounds like a resumption of a conversation that everyone has had with her before:

“I loved my mom, and I wanted her to love me, that’s natural, right? But at first it was like she has a very important busy life and it has to come first, and I get the leftovers. So, like, I ask for more. ‘I want two hours of your attention between when you come home and when we sit to supper. Not to tell me what I did wrong at school, or for me to tell you what you did wrong as a mommy, but just us, you know, what was your day like?’”

It sounds to me like an overall self-empowering message, a good stance to take, but Jake is less impressed. “But you already knew she couldn’t do that, right? I mean, you told us before that you’d realized by then that she needs to be the all-suffering Mama who sacrifices everything, she’s all invested in that, so like if you took that away from her she wouldn’t know what to do?”

“Well, yeah, I guess”, April acknowledges. “She always needed me to be the bad girl who misbehaves. The more she could get me to strike at her, then everything is my fault and how I

am gonna hafta change, it becomes all about I'm the one who needs to get herself changed."

"So you tossed that little bread crumb out there, 'Let's just talk for a couple hours and see if we can be friends', knowing that wasn't gonna fly, and then you spread your wings and flew the fuck away from that, because she couldn't do it, huh? You were already out that door. For better or worse, you'd made your decision already. If you'd really meant to connect to her you knew it was gonna take a long time for her to get past her own shit. She didn't put you out, you did".

Jake shrugs and continues. "Don't get that I'm sayin' you shouldn't have split, like I get why it was time. Just that you shouldn't say she put you out. You *do* carry that around a lot."

There's a lot of silence after Joe finishes speaking. Marie and Jeremy are the psychodrama facilitators, and I see that they step in and prompt if none of the other program residents is saying anything. Marie, mid-twenties gal in a denim skirt with butterfly barrettes in her hair, suggests, "What would you say to her if you had her here in the room today?"

Jeremy, the other facilitator, guy about Marie's age with spiky red hair and a gold necktie weirdly looped around his neck like a scarf, chimes in, "Let Marie be your mom. Don't censor anything, just let fly with it."

April takes a breath, then faces Marie-Mom and snarls, "I got nothing thanks to you. *Like you care!* I was just trash for the garbage can as far as you were concerned, well, you win, it all went to shit. I can't get my life together because you never bothered to show me how. How do you like your daughter the junkie waste, Mom? Are you fucking proud?"

It's riveting and real; For the first time since I arrived, it feels like some valid process is taking place, something other than repeated promises about how good this damn place is going to

be for me.

April looks tough and fragile at the same time. I want to comfort her. I want to make up for how her life has felt so far.

Marie isn't taking that approach. "You listen to yourself? You're giving her all the power. Mommy's the reason you can't live a decent life, got nothing at all to do with you, so you're going to punish her by proving she's right and being a nothing, yeah that'll teach her."

Now April looks cornered, attacked. Unsurprising. Wow.

Jake is at her too. "You can't blame her for everything. I'm not saying she wasn't a shitty mother in a lot of ways, but we learn to stick with winners and plot our own course. That stuff's for real, you know."

\* \* \*

The bell marking the end of the period occupied by psychodrama rings, and people disperse. I stumble out into the hallway with new thoughts. That hadn't been *all* good. There'd been something kind of ambush-y about it, and also something just a bit scripted. But there'd been the potential for something very healthy going on in there. I mean they were talking about really personal real stuff, the kind of stuff people don't talk about.

I'd told my dad I'd avoid making up my mind against the place from the outset. The fact that my parents love me didn't mean it was in my best interest to go the direction they wanted me to, but it did kind of mean they really thought it was. So I should consider what they think is in my

own best interests. Similarly, the fact that this institution, Elk Meadow, is considered to be a helpful presence for people under stress and conflict doesn't mean that it isn't; it actually could be. Overwhelmingly, I have a considerably greater confidence in the parental than the therapeutic but if I were going to consider this place for real, I have to walk a tightrope. Wary trust, as oxymoronic as that conjugates, you know what I mean?

Yeah. Come show me what you got. I'm actually earnest, not cynical, even if I'm jaded. I mean, it's not like I have a plan and a next destination. God I'd love a plan and a destination, I seem stuck in perpetual figure-things-out mode.

"Oh there you are, Derek", a voice says from behind me.

I finish recomposing myself from my startle and recognize Emily and nod. I'm again struck by how she looks attired and coiffed to go to the office. I mean, there's a *dress for the office* thing that women have to deal with, but it's like she's feeling power from it and really into it, and she's just a resident. Today she's in matching grey vest and pants. The staffers Jeremy and Marie definitely look more casually dressed.

"One of the things you may have seen?", Emily suggests, "...the way people like Jake and Bob get involved in April's, or anyone's, therapy. Part of your own therapeutic goals should be participation in other folks' process. I mean, your participation is actually one of the things you get graded on. Here at Elk Meadow we don't believe in experts. It's not like Dr. Barnes can fix us with a magic gesture. Healing comes as part of a community and we all have to participate in making that happen."

Emily is interesting. *Staff* is a social role composed of behaviors and appearance and vocal tone, not just the fact of being on the employment roster, and although she isn't on staff, she's doing that role with almost military intensity and precision. She's all-in on this place, very obedient follower, but it's also like seizing authority, especially in a setting where the staff don't wear uniforms or sport name tags. She presents as a professional and she clearly has familiarity with the role. *Take me seriously.*

I wonder if she's mocking them derisively. It would be so funny if she were.

I wonder if there's something sexist about me thinking she's been acting like staff but not thinking that of Joe. I mean, he's all in on this place too.

= July 21, 1982 (Day Three) =

Okay, I have to confess something kind of embarrassing. Because the decision to do the thing I did next was so *close*, as decisions go, with good arguments in my head for doing it or not doing it. Or at *least* for not doing it *yet*. Anyway, I considered each position, having really good orators inside my head for their chosen viewpoint, that I'm afraid the deciding element was ultimately how cute and clever I thought it was.

Not that I expected it to be *received* that way, mind you. But I couldn't help appreciating it myself.

(After this, I was *really* going to have to be extra willing to consider my ego and my

defensiveness and all that personal-stake shit as it came into consideration. It's actually not all bad in this place so far. I do see some potential.

But anyway...)

I did it yesterday, the twentieth. Or I still think of it as yesterday, because I hadn't been to bed yet. It was around 3 am and I was processing and replaying and feeling and interpreting the two days I'd just been through. Then I dug into my suitcase and pulled out the remains of a ream of blank typing paper, folded a page into quarters and ripped it along the folds, and then picked up a pen.

*Cram.* That's what it felt like, my word for being on the receiving end of the process. That since my arrival, the other humans in my environment had been trying their dead-level best to cram their thoughts into my head. Non-reciprocally. A very one-way push, with a lot of enthusiasm on their part.

On the quarter sheet in front of me, I began writing the word "cram" over and over, above and below and to the right of the first occurrence, but as I moved right on the sheet I made them denser, closer, more numerous, until they collided and combined to form a brick wall. *Thanks, Roger Waters!*

I put that piece aside and started over on the next quarter sheet, writing the word "CRAM" over and over in a vertical array, a CRAM pancake stack. Then to the right of that, I repeated the pancake of CRAMs but compressed it, squishing the stack vertically so the words were more tightly packed together. I repeated that, with the words now overlapping and the stack flattening.



As I continued, they became dense and illegible and then compressed into a flat black line.

I picked up the third segment and on it I wrote the word “cram” except this time in large block letters. Then I filled in the white space within the C with smaller letter c’s and did that again, making the letters yet smaller, until I had a densely c-packed C. Then repeated the process with the other three letters.

Finally, on the remaining slice of paper, I wrote:

Communication is supposed to be a two way street

The flow of thoughts & ideas into my head needs to be balanced by a flow of thoughts & ideas back OUT. Not just everything crammed into me.

CRAMMmming your thoughts into my head. CRAMMmming them into all the hours of the day. Displacing my own thoughts into smaller and tighter spaces. Squeezing away my thinking room.

There is a lot of WE around here. I am not a part of any WE until I get to join it as a contributing participant.  
I’m here about US but I start off as ME. And on the subject of ME, I am the authority, the expert, and the person in charge of my treatment plan.

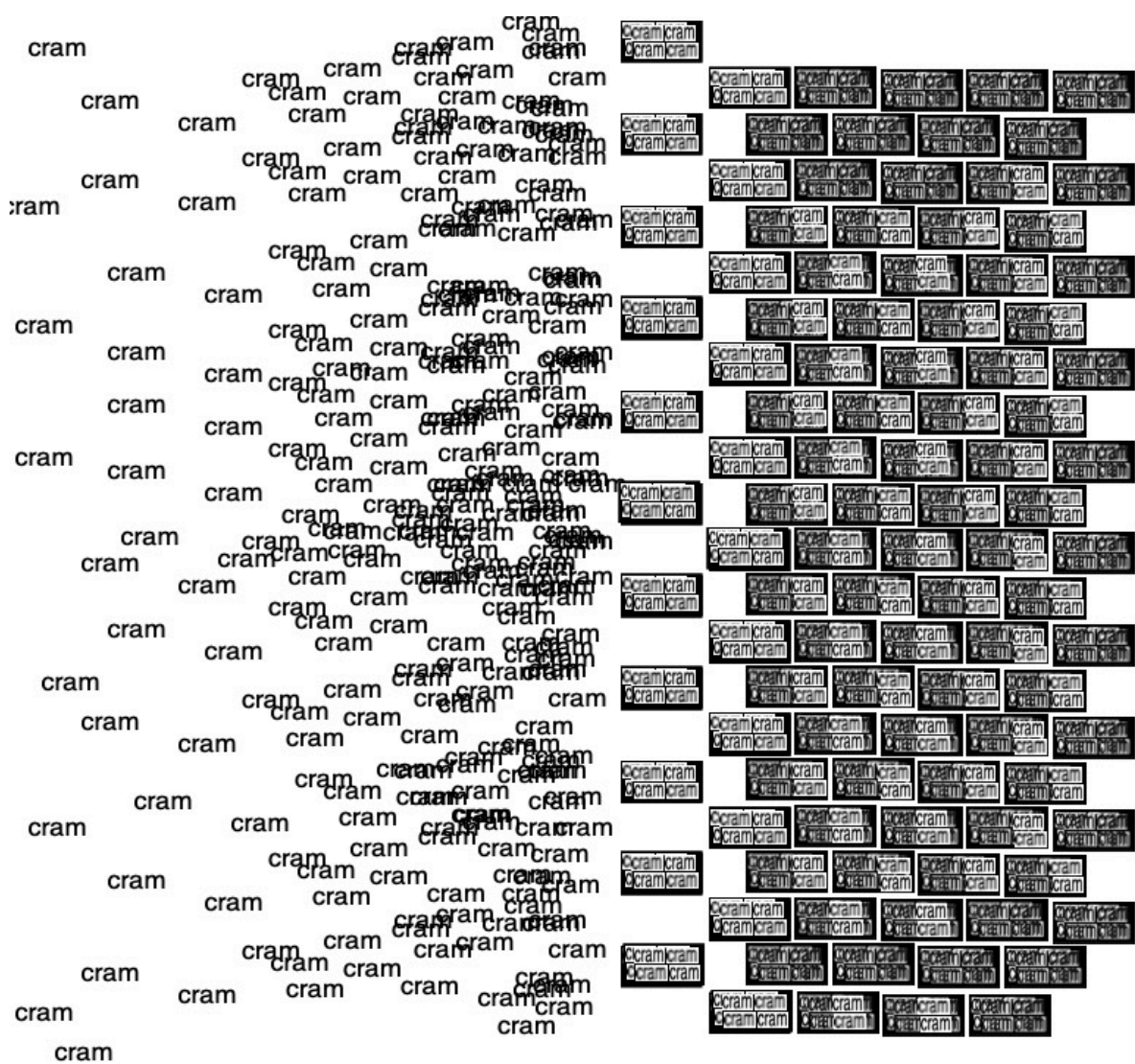
I’m here because I want some help with it, so yes I’m here to listen. But that’s not an invitation to take over.

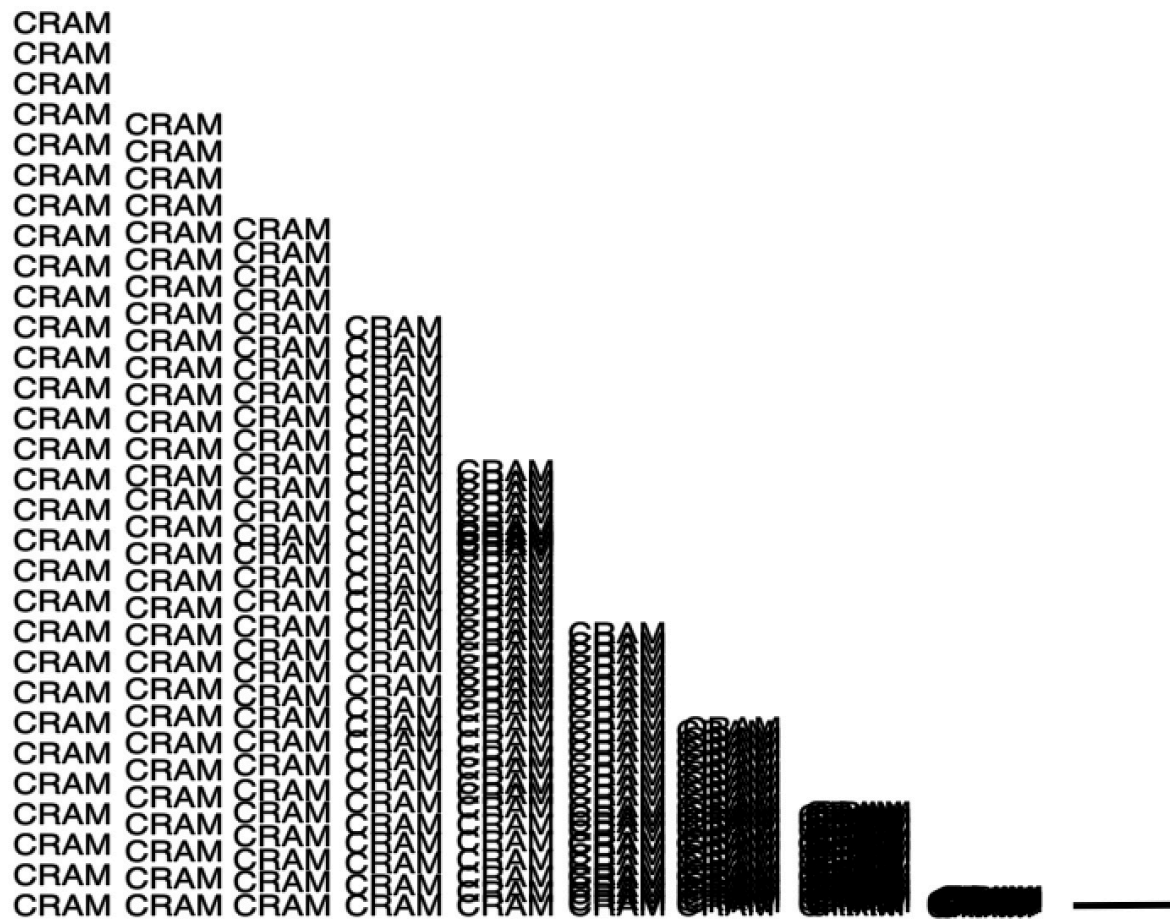
Then after some trimming with scissors...

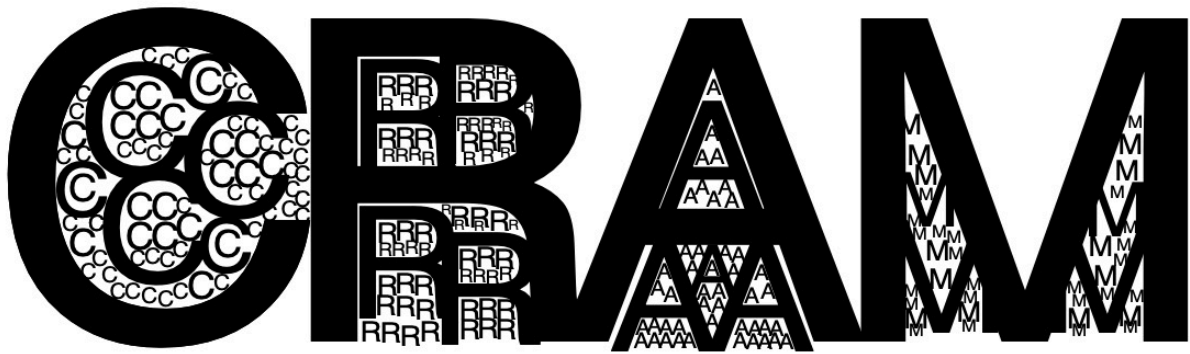
*Yes, let’s not forget that whatever else this place is about, at least they don’t treat us like imminent dangers to ourselves, hence I can have scissors. And it’s cool that April gets to*

*wear chains and stuff...there's a lot of freedom here even if there are some intrusive constraints...*

...I taped the four compositions to the outside of my door, the public-facing side, then stripped off my clothes and went to sleep.







There is no explosion. It's not like I lit a bomb and flung it. It's obviously happening several notches slower than that, and I'm here watching it unfold. Okay. I mean, I'm sure it's going to have an impact.

I file in behind other folks on the cafeteria line, my hair wet and hanging in ringlets. I nod to April, who is picking out a cinnamon bun; she nods back. I get my coffee, consider some nice-looking sausage links. I notice Emily pouring some half 'n half into her coffee and nod to her too, but she turns away, perhaps not having seen me.

I eat at one of the white plastic tables and then rise, carrying my tray to put on the conveyor belt to be washed. Joe is ahead of me, makes eye contact. There is the start of a smile that disappears into a flat line and a stare and then he glances around.

I'm expecting there to be some reaction to what I put on my door but it's hard to know if I'm observing any of that. Some people's behavior around me seems a little off but since I'm looking for that I'd probably perceive it whether it's actually happening or not.

For instance, when I go in for morning unit meeting, I see Ronald talking with April, and then he nudges her and it seems like they're both looking at me for a moment. Maybe they were talking about me. They aren't signaling a hello or waving me over but maybe they wouldn't anyway. It's not like I'm worried that folks are talking about me or that I'd be upset if they weren't, but I admit I'm curious. I did something from which I hoped to see some ripples. I really wish I was better at this "communicate with other people" thing.

I have biofeedback next on my schedule today, which is a lot less relevant a venue for

watching for reactions to my cram posters than psychodrama would have been. But afterwards, when I get out and head for the cafeteria, I eat lunch feeling a bit more like I'm Illustration Figure One to whom everyone's eyes are being drawn. More surreptitious glances, more conversations that stop when I come close. What I find amazing is that no one has said anything to me yet. I consider that some more. Nothing in this place feels spontaneous. Everything is calculated. This is something they don't have a rule for yet. No one wants to react and run the risk of reacting wrong.

Or not. I should at least consider the possibility that I'm being paranoid as hell. That could be, you know. Perhaps this type of door poetry is all sufficiently unusual that they just don't know how to categorize it so as to respond to it.

Or nobody has noticed. Yeah, I'll hold that in consideration. Highly useful exercise. But it mostly feels like everyone's afraid to react because they don't want to react the wrong way and get in trouble. Seriously.

\* \* \*

The big group, with Dr. Barnes, is where things finally get interesting.

Not right away. First a lot of innocuous news, similar to morning meeting. Our diet has been rated by a cooking show's chef, and it compares to a landmark eatery, except that it's healthy. We will miss Ms. Dockery, who has been sorting and aiming our endless mail to the right mailboxes all these years.

My attention wanders. Ronald is eating a leftover biscuit wrapped in a napkin. I wonder again if he and April had been discussing me earlier. I glance around looking for April. There she is, standing next to Jake, who's in a grey ZZTop tour shirt. My eyes want to linger on the contours of her torso. She has cute shapes and looks so nice in that denim jacket she wears.

Dr. Barnes moves on. "Now, Ellen, here, she's all positioned to make progress like her friend April, wouldn't you say so, Emily?" Dr. Barnes looks like one of those "before" pictures for Grecian Formula, his hair a carefully shaped black nest highlighted with metallic-grey wires. Probably sprays it with hairspray once he's got every strand in place just so.

Emily stands and makes a wry disappointed face as she gestures with an open palm towards the pinch-faced Ellen. "We all hope for that, and there's been real progress on her attempts to make amends, but I'm afraid we're still stuck on whether to go back to school, and she continues to obsess about running away to take a vacation."

"Do you have any comment to make about that?", Barnes asks Ellen.

Ellen's eyebrows pull down; her shoulders hunch and she tilts her face towards the floor. "I am... considering school", she says, starting off slowly and accelerating into it, "it wasn't... what I'd planned on doing, but I can see that it might be... good for me to have something regular like that when I get back. But that's for when I get back. I've been planning this trip for years. It's



not like it's some crazy... idea I came up with when I was shooting. We have the money for it and I deserve it. I don't see why everyone is so focused on trying to get me to give it up!" She adds some scowl.

"Amanda, what's your take on this?", Barnes asks, calling on one of the other residents.

Amanda stands. Tall gal in a red t-shirt. "Ellen still seems very resistant to the idea that she's attempting to run away from her problems. It's a pattern we see often, but she has an emotional stake in not considering that that's a possibility."

Jake chimes in. "I know how much that vacation means to you. You were looking forward to it for so long and it's your present to yourself. But the team is trying to get you to look at maybe the reason it means so much to you is that it represents a get out of jail free card, just hop on board and leave the old Ellen behind."

Dr Barnes continues, "So there is concern. You hear it, Ellen, but you don't credit it with any significance, because escape is still more important to you than doing a fair evaluation. Unfortunately, we can't escape ourselves. Whenever we arrive at our destination, we look around and hey, there we are, same old us. What do you think you can do to get past that resistance?"

I burst in, "If you're demanding she cancel her plans, I don't think that's a fair either-or. Maybe Ellen's vacation is not a good idea for her, but she doesn't have to hold on to a belief that it *is* in order to keep planning to go ahead with it. She can still be seriously considering that you folks might be right and she shouldn't go."

People look at me briefly, then at each other, looking for their cues.

Dr. Barnes replies, “You’re suggesting that she can believe and disbelieve in the same thing at the same time. Humans can’t do that.”

“No, I’m saying that to believe is not good or necessary at all. You make a *premise* that taking a vacation is a good thing, and you plan around it, but you continue to consider other viewpoints.”

“Oh, so if we call it a “*premise*”, that makes everything all right. What if I call it a fishhook? Why does giving it a different name fix the problem?” He shrugs and makes an eloquent palms-upward gesture.

“A belief is where you’ve made a mental commitment to something being true or false. But you can adopt a premise without believing you’re right. Like if the lights go out and I don’t know which wall I’m touching, I can decide to act on the premise that this is the wall that goes to the stairs. I can feel along it and keep walking until I find stairs or get back to where I started from or end up somewhere else. Maybe I’ll throw out the premise as probably wrong, but it gives me a starting point, so I can act.”

“What you’re doing now is *intellectualizing*. It’s a defense, Derek, a way of not dealing with what’s real and basic. Ellen’s problems won’t go away just because you *intellectualize* about them. That’s false. It’s not a real reaction.”

“No, I don’t think that’s true of intellectualizing at all. But then, I *am* an intellectual. So maybe I’m biased. I’m willing to consider the possibility that you’re right about this...but I’m going to continue to act on the premise that you are not.”

Barnes glares explosively for a split-second.

Ellen has been staring flatly at me throughout this exchange, and now jumps in, “Why do you want to get involved, it’s not like you care! I saw what you wrote on your door. You think we suck! So who do you think you’re fooling?”

Dr. Barnes looks distinctly pleased. He slides his hands down into his pockets and inclines his head like he’s thinking carefully, then says, “We don’t like to restrict people’s expressiveness. But at the same time, we feel confined to at least a little respect for how one person’s expression makes someone else feel. I understand that some ‘poetry’ and such is now posted on Derek’s door over in Unit Two. Emily, I believe you are Unit Leader for Derek as well?”

Emily stands up, cold-eyeing me. “Everyone in my unit is very upset. We tried to make Derek feel welcome, like he was joining us on our journey, and he acts like we were kidnapping him! People are saying privately that this is blocking their progress and erasing their confidence in their project. Derek could have spoken to any of us at any point, but he chose to attack us all and make these accusations.”

I nod. I wait.

Dr. James Barnes stares at me for several beats, then shrugs and says to one and all but addressing it to me, “I take it that you accept what you’re hearing?”

“Well, I was definitely the one who taped the messages on my door. Whether my doing so means what Emily says it means is open to interpretation, and so is the meaning of what I taped up there. People should read it and make up their own minds. Go ahead. I’m listening.”

“Well, don’t you think as a person welcomed into Unit Two you should care about what the others on your unit think? Are they that unimportant to you?”

“They’re of central importance to me because they’re the people most likely to understand me and be understood by me, and I came here to participate.”

“Everyone here who has gone down to look at your door says it’s a real poke in the face, that it’s hostile. Not the kind of thing you do to let people know they’re important to you.”

“There are reasons for giving someone a sharp poke aside from being hostile. Or wanting to hurt them. A few basic understandings needed to be spelled out. Otherwise their care seems likely to take a bad trajectory. I had to clarify my own relationship to my own case management and how anybody else’s participation is going to be viewed.”

“Yes, you find all kinds of ways to not need anybody. You can do it all yourself. Too together to need feedback. Too wise to need any advice. Behold, this is Derek. He is self-contained. He doesn’t need you, for anything.” Barnes winks conspiratorially at his rapt audience. “We’ve heard that song a few times, haven’t we? Well, I suppose since we’re unnecessary to Derek’s recovery, we may as well stop focusing the spotlight on him and leave him in peace. Valerie, I hear you had a real breakthrough in NA. Is that true?”

Heads rotate. Again, Valerie doesn’t like the attention. “I guess so”, she answers flatly.

Ronald pats her shoulder and said, “She’s been on the same road as the rest of us.”

Joanne from recreation says, “Well, she’s come a long way towards recognizing that she’s part of a group.”

Valerie says, “I just wish this would all be over. I want to go home.”

April gives her a brief hug and says, “We all want that.”

\* \* \*

“I’m Jake, and I’m an alcoholic.”

“Hi, Jake!”

Alcoholics Anonymous meets in one of the conference rooms, and, like all the other items on my schedule of activities, has been chosen for me.

“I always knew I had a drinking problem, don’t get me wrong. Like, you know, you tell yourself when you wake up in the morning and your shirt is all caked with where you threw up on yourself and your head is pounding, and you say ‘I can’t keep going on like this, I gotta stop’, right? But you can’t do anything about that yet, first you gotta get your stomach settled and scrape the shit off your tongue and get some clothes on and figure out what day it is today. And by the time you got yourself put together to face the day, you got Red and Joel and Renfro saying, ‘Hey, you going to the party? Let’s get a fifth of vodka and see what’s bouncin’ around’, and you’re thinking that sounds like a good idea.

“So yeah, Ellen and George and them, when they say ‘We got promised’, and ‘You said it was gonna be like this, and now you’re saying that’. Sure, ol’ Dr. Barnes, ol’ Sneaky Pete, he made me all kinds of promises, told me all kinds of things, all to get me to sign on the dotted

line. But they got me in here, and, you know something? I'm an alcoholic. Maybe they lied some to get me in this seat, but I need help. So that's my news to celebrate today. I am where I'm s'posed to be."

Gary nods approvingly. "Thank you, Jake. Who else has something positive for us this evening?" Gary Stevens himself is apparently not necessarily an alcoholic, or at least not as far as any of us know; Gary is a facilitator, an Elk Meadow staff member. I always thought one of the selling points of AA was that everyone was on an equal footing. But in here we have a facilitator. "How about you, Luis? Anything good you can share?"

"I guess. Hey everybody I'm Luis, I'm an alcoholic, how're you doing, blah blah blah. I heard from my brother and he says their loan got approved, so when I get out he's going to put me in the showroom, I got a job when I get out."

"Yay, high five", Ronald says, and they smack palms.

Gary Stevens is not the only non-alcoholic in the room, as I don't consider myself to be one either. Non-alcoholic is an identity that's assembled on a negative, kind of like *atheist*. Defined by what you are not. Based on what I'd observed so far, I am bracing for the moment when I'm prompted to confess my alcoholism and then get told that I'm being resistant and defensive if I say I don't think I am.

Valerie shrugs. "I sort of have some good news, I guess. I was on the phone with my sister. We haven't exactly been the closest. Growing up, I mean, not just recently. But I really felt like talking when I had the chance, and it's like we're not as angry, it was actually nice talking with her. She was in a good mood and wanted to tell me about this party where she made this chili

that everybody loved and it's got, whatchamacallit, you know, that green stuff that looks like parsley all cut up into it..."

"Cilantro", I supply, recognizing it from the description.

A couple people glance my way. Valerie looks at me blankly, then keeps going, "...anyway, her kid sees this mound of chopped green stuff and gets the idea that they're making pot brownies and I guess it ended up being pretty funny instead of an argument about it, anyway, she's telling me about all that. And I'm going 'yeah', and 'uh huh' and enjoying the conversation, ... so then out of nowhere she says 'We could try it.' So there's a chance I could stay with them for a while once I'm clean."

Ronald nods at that. I do too.

Amanda says, "That's cool. For her to say that, and also if it works out."

\* \* \*

I go through the food line and get my dinner tray, then sit down at the empty end of a nearby table. I open the book I've been reading and find my place.

After a moment, Ronald slides in across from me and props his chin on both palms and stares at me for a long couple beats. "Fucking hell, doesn't it piss you off that nobody's talking to you?"

"Huh? Oh, that explains a few things. I didn't realize I was being coventried!"

"What's 'coventried'?"

“I don’t know why it’s called that, but when you give someone the silent treatment, lots of people call that ‘sending them to Coventry’.” I make quotation marks with my fingers.

“Oh, okay. Well anyway, dude, look, it doesn’t have to be this way. C’mon, man, we’re all in here trying to get our shit together somehow. I don’t know what you think we’re up to, I didn’t get all that what you put up on your door, to be honest, but we all want to work on ourselves. For some of us, this may be our last chance.”

“I’m here to work on my own shit too. I’m sorry everyone feels like I’m against them, or against this place. That’s not how it is. But you need to understand a couple things. First off, two years ago the people at my school tricked me into signing a paper and next thing I knew I was on a locked ward and I had no rights. So I’m very protective of my right to decide what is and what isn’t going to happen to me. And another thing. Just because I need to get better in certain ways, and work on my own hangups, doesn’t mean I’m trying to catch up with normal. In most ways, normal is several steps in the wrong direction. I’m doing better than most folks out there, and I’m sure as hell not handing the reins of my life over to anyone else, I just want to get even better with some stuff.”

“You sound almost human.” That doesn’t come from Ronald, but from Ellen, who has slipped in from behind me and is now sitting to my right. “You should talk like that all the time and quit trying to impress everybody with all that bullshit you keep flinging out.”

“I still hear a lot of bullshit”, Ronald responds. “You’re still saying you’re better than everybody else and you think you can confuse everyone with your made-up pretending, you’re all ‘Look at me, I’m so smart I don’t have to change my shit’, yeah that’s you, bro.”



“It’s not all bullshit”, says April, who has followed Ellen over to the table. “What you said to Dr. Bigshot, I caught that. You told him he’s taking the position where the only way we’re not in denial and still blocking the truth out is if we go with everything he says. You didn’t say it plain like that, you said it the way he likes to talk, which is like calling him on it, like ‘Hey, I caught you making like you can’t ever be wrong and whenever we don’t agree it means we’re in denial, but we’re onto your game’. And he didn’t like it much.” She snorts.

“Blah, blah, blahcakes”, Ellen says. “Look, you say you want to work on yourself. So work on yourself.”

By now, Jake and a few others have wandered over to the conversation. Jake says, “Hey, you know, we all came here from different places. Not just ‘I got sent here from Detroit’ or ‘I’m from Florida’, but also our situations. Ronald used to be a hotshot business manager for some record label, and rode around in big limousines, didn’t you? Cocaine and fancy spoons. And me, I was looking at time, too many possession busts and I used to steal and fence some stuff to support my habit, so they said maybe I straighten my shit out, I just get probation. I don’t know how you got here but once we’re here we kinda realize we’re all in the same boat.”

“I was in a nursing program”, I tell them, “and I got crossways with the hospital and the program staff over patients’ rights issues, and for my parents it was kind of the last straw. I keep flunking out of colleges and not being able to keep jobs. My folks are very sheltered and old-fashioned and neither of them drinks except on special occasions, and they think all drugs, pot, LSD, cocaine, heroin, it’s all the same and if you use any of them you’ve got a drug problem. So for them it’s an explanation for why I’m not getting on my feet and getting on with life. They

also think I'm probably mentally ill, although they think the drugs probably did that too. Those aren't my reasons, but that's how I got invited to come spend some time here. I got told a lot of stuff about how they were gonna work with me on improving my social and communication skills, and how I get more of what I want and need from my social environment, and I *did* feel like maybe I needed to work on that. I've got a lot of frustration about never fitting in or belonging anywhere, and I wasn't doing anything else at the time, so I went along with it."

April and Ellen state that they're tired and are going to go back to their room. I think maybe Ellen is mostly tired of the conversation, and of me, whenever she's looking at me it's a scowl and a yecch, full-on revulsion and disgust.

"Shit", George says once they're down the hall, "That Ellen stares at you like you just poured dill pickle juice all over her ice cream."

"Yeah, right? I don't know what that's all about."

George looks at me for a moment. "She's maybe got a problem about who you get hot for."

"I haven't ever come on to her or anything. If I were going to try to flirt with someone in this place, I don't think it'd be her." *And definitely not when she's glaring at me.*

Ronald says, "Well, I hope it isn't me." He actually looks awkward and apologetic about it.

*Oh, that.* "You shouldn't worry anyhow, but relax. I got nothing against people who do, but I don't personally find male merchandise arousing. Contrary to expectations. I know I set off a lot of people's antenna in that direction."

"Uh, yeah, nothin' personal dude", Jake remarks, "but I just totally assumed you were gay. Well, like you said, nothing wrong with it if you were, and if you aren't, you aren't."

“You think Ellen’s got an attitude about gay guys?”, I ask. “The ones that do, they don’t usually think it makes it all wonderfully different and okay if it turns out I’m a *straight* sissy femmy boy instead.”

George says, “It’s kind of hard to tell with Ellen. She don’t warm up to people easy, and yeah, she thinks she’s got you pegged as something she don’t like, but I never heard her say anything about it.” He looks at me as if contemplating.

= July 22, 1982 (Day Four) =

I slip off by myself after breakfast and find my way back to that little piano I’d seen. I sit down with my morning coffee in my left hand and play some gentle running chords, arpeggios and such, with my right. It has a nice sound for its size. Maybe I’ll come back here later and play for real. At the moment I’m feeling a little bit fragile and shy. It would be one thing if people basically left me alone and let me play, or came by to listen and said nice things. It would be something else if someone told me to stop making noise or said something hostile while I was playing.

\* \* \*

In the same room as yesterday evening's Alcoholics Anonymous, I now get introduced to its younger sibling. Narcotics Anonymous.

"Yeah, it's the same twelve steps, but there are some things that got added by people coming from a place of drug addiction, like 'Stick with winners', where we've learned that you can't get clean and stay clean and still hang out with people who are still getting wasted", George informs me.

A woman I'd seen but hadn't been introduced to yet scrapes her chair, pivoting it to face me. "You can't make amends to all the people you've hurt as long as you're still blaming most of them. Lots of us here, we practically had needles with us in our cribs. Like here's Sesame Street and today Mr. Muppet is going to teach us how to freebase."

"Noelle's right", Valerie tells me. "But some of us didn't get into it until later in life. They give you stuff in hospitals for pain, like if you wipe out skiing and your leg is in pieces, or you get kidney stones so bad they have to bust them up with a supersonic hammer." She glances over at Ellen momentarily, then back and continues. "So you find out that you like it. And when you get out you can get more. At least for awhile. Then when they won't refill your scrip anymore, you ask around and your friends have leftovers, or their cousin's doctor keeps on refilling and we can buy some off of him."

"And nobody says you're a junkie, not then", Ellen remarks bitterly. "Junkies shoot up in phone booths and buy drugs in the park after dark. But as long as you got what you're using from a prescription pad, you're just doing what the doctor told you to."

"Well, that's getting awfully close to blaming other people again", Gary Stevens corrects her.

“But yeah, narcotics isn’t just heroin. People get strung out on dilaudid, demerol, vicodin, morphine, codeine...”

I nod. “I’m familiar with those from nurse’s training. I’ve even administered some of them.”

Gary smiles. “How often did you end up on the receiving end of your ‘administrations’?”

“I never did. I never stole or used any hospital medication and I’ve actually never injected myself, although in nursing school we had to inject each other once with plain saline.”

“Aww, c’mon, man”, George protests, “it’s just us here. What got you into this fancy resort?”

Ellen is saying something more derogatory under her breath, from the tone of it; but I can’t catch it.

“You folks want to know what drugs I made use of before coming to this place.” I make it a statement. I tick them off on my fingers. “I smoke pot. I drop acid a few times a year. I’ve smoked hash now and then. I’ve taken mescaline once or twice. Never managed to score any peyote, but I’ve done mushrooms a few times. Going tripping.” I switch to the fingers of the other hand. “Several times people have tried to turn me on to cocaine, but all it ever does is make my nose go numb, so I don’t get what that’s all about. Let’s see... one time I tried something that was supposed to be MDA, I don’t know if it was or not, it turned me into a total zombie, I had to crawl out of that party, couldn’t stand up. Codeine... my mom had some codeine capsules, and twice in junior high I swiped about four of them, but after that they were so low I knew she’d notice, and she never got a refill. I can see why opiates are addictive, it’s

probably a good thing I didn't run into more of it. Umm...oh yeah, once I tried swallowing a whole lot of ground nutmeg because I'd been told it was psychedelic in large quantities, but all it did was make me really irritated at everything. That's all I can think of." It actually sounds like a pretty hardcore list to me.

"*Bullshit!!*", Jake says, scowling. "I thought you were seriously on the up and up, man, I really did. How you gonna work on yourself when you can't stop lying to yourself and us even when you know that lie's not gonna fly. There's no way you end up in a place like this for smoking some joints and going tripping on weekends!"

"I'm not bullshitting you. I *told* y'all that I don't think of myself as having a drug or alcohol problem. I may have other problems getting in my way, and yeah my *parents* think so, they'd think anyone who drinks more than two beers at a time or drinks every weekend has a drinking problem, and their attitude to pot is straight out of *Reefer Madness*."

"Hold out your arms", April challenges.

I do. Several people peer at the crease of my elbows. Jake and April exchange dubious glances.

"That don't mean shit", Jake proclaims. "He's in nursing school, I'm sure he knows how to sterilize works. He could be shooting between his toes for all we know."

"To start out with?", April replies. She holds out her own arms wordlessly. White spiderwebs trace patterns. Jake and George display their own histories.

"Okay", Jake concedes, "so maybe cocaine then. Ronald did most of his up his nose."

"I told you", I argue, "I've tried it, I dunno, maybe five or six times, always some friend or

the good buddy of a friend going to introduce me to the best experience of my life, and they'd lay down these tracks and give me the straw, and I'd shnurff the stuff up my nose... and they'd be staring at me like *'Wow, right? Isn't that the most fucking fantastic feeling ever?'*, and I'd be like, 'Dude, my nose is numb, this is like going to the dentist and getting novocaine, when does this shit wear off'...?"

Incredulous stares all around.

"I get a better buzz off of coffee. I don't know why, that's just how it is."

\* \* \*

"Hey, Derek", Emily greets me at mid-corridor. "Do you feel like you're settling in and getting used to the place?"

"Well, somewhat. And vice versa. Still a lot of wariness on both sides of the equation but not too bad."

"It does seem like you've opened yourself more to the community lately", she agrees, "and that's a good start. It might be a good idea for you to begin thinking in terms of your progress. As you know, we have four tiers of achievement, starting with Level Four, which you earn just for getting yourself here and recognizing you need to work on your issues. With each new level that you bring yourself to, you are trusted with more privileges and you play more of a role in

assisting other people in their own climb. You reach Level One and you're a candidate for discharge, and they place you, they help you find jobs."

"Who makes the progress assessment? Does each patient make their own, or Dr. Barnes, or our individual counselors, or what?"

"The community as a whole discusses it in group. Dr. Barnes has the final say, of course, but it's all of us together." She shifts the notebook she was carrying to the other arm and shoots me a small smile and gives my shoulder a gentle squeeze.

"Aah, I see. And let's say someone wasn't regarded as making progress but they were satisfied with how they were doing. How does that play out?"

"Well... that would usually be a sign that they're stuck in a place where they aren't seeing their own issues as clearly... I mean you have to let them go at their own pace, I guess, but the path to graduating out and rejoining the larger community is up the tiers. They're not going to put a person who's at Level Three back into the world and set them up for failure."

"It was my understanding that a person could leave at any time if they decided this place wasn't working for them, though...?"

"Well, yeah, I mean if someone was signing out of the program. Then they're on their own." She shrugs and looks back at me a bit sorrowfully.

\* \* \*



“Cast Iron Window” is an instrumental piece I composed while I was living in Athens. I had found several places nearby where I could get access to a piano, to make up for the lack of one at my grandparents’ house. Composed a lot of pieces in youth centers and churches and schools.

“Cast Iron Window” is a piledriver of a piece, more the kind of rock you expect to be driven by a bass player, with the left hand oscillating a fast staccato pattern way down in the subterranean part of the keys, while the right hand smashes slow emphatic chords like the power chords on a lead electric guitar.

The piano is situated in a small alcove at one end of a fairly short corridor that people make use of to get out to recreational activities. The sound is good from where I’m sitting, but I think it probably isn’t overwhelming anyone out beyond this hallway.

Deep into the piece, around the point where it finally resolves into a coda section, I become aware of a presence, someone standing behind me watching and listening.

I build the melange of overlapping chords then simultaneously release the damper and lift my fingers while holding down the sostenuto pedal, and let the sound echo in the hall.

“How do you do that?” It’s Noelle, the short-haired patient I met in Narcotics earlier. Valerie with her. “How are you making the piano sound like that? I used to play piano some but you’re getting a different sound out of it somehow, like you got a distortion pedal or something.”

“Yeah”, Valerie adds, “that was actually pretty awesome.”

“Wow, thanks. Well, for one thing, I’m pounding a lot of very low notes, so they resonate all

up through the strings up above them, and with the damper pedal down most of the time it really lets overtones build. I'm also using a trick with the middle pedal, on these little spinets they do this thing where the dampers lift completely from the lower harp but just lightly touch on the upper strings — that lets me bang out short sharp notes and chords, they don't sustain like the low notes, but they still ring more from overtones than if you weren't using the pedal. It's different from what a real sostenuto pedal does if you've got a grand, but it's useful for certain effects."

Noelle looks thoughtful. "You wrote that, I mean it's your own music, isn't it?"

"Yeah... I discovered a long time ago I could come sit at the piano and, whatever mood I was in, the piano would give me the right kind of company. Like if I was all lonely and sad, I'd touch the keys soft and get plaintive pretty sounds and they'd be like hugs or something, or like the piano was crying for me, and it would make me feel less alone. Or if I'm angry and frustrated, maybe I'd come pound and bang away on it, like what you just heard, and it makes these big powerful sounds, and that would make me feel better, too. I think music has always been my best therapist."

"That's cool. Well, we didn't mean to stop you. Play some more. I mean, if you feel like it."

I do. I launch into something else. Later, when I glance around, they're gone, but it doesn't feel like being deserted or abandoned. It feels like someone came by and heard, even if they weren't here listening now, and that was nice.

\* \* \*

Mark's office is one of the most featureless spaces for any kind of personal counseling that I've ever seen. The desk is a metal-legged brown-topped box, designed to look like wood but made entirely of metal and plastic, utterly planar and sharply cornered. Mark has a metal file holder with a handful of manila folders about organizational procedures, and a phone, but no personal items or motivational posters or anything like that; the low bookshelf holds dictionaries and a Physician's Desk Reference and the DSM-III psychiatric diagnostic handbook and other reference materials, very generic.

And yet.

So far, Mark has always come from behind his desk to sit directly across from me and I'm guessing he does so for all of his patients, presumably not wanting the desk to come between. Maybe he hopes it will foster trust and a sense of equality. I appreciate that.

"The selling point that really pushed me towards coming to Elk Meadow was communications skills and strategies", I tell him. "That's where I think I have the biggest deficits. I didn't fit in with other kids very well after about third grade. When other boys would hassle me about doing what a girl would do or saying something that sounded to them like what girls would say, or, you know, being like a girl, ... in whatever other way... I mean, when they did that to each other, the boy being called out would usually get all angry and blustery and push that away, you know what I mean? 'Come over here and say that', or 'Prove it, fairy pants', and I

was more like ‘Yeah, so? The girls are doing it right’, and so I didn’t push away from doing or saying things that might get me seen that way because I didn’t care. So after a few years I was mostly off by myself. I didn’t notice right away. I still had some friends who were girls, but it wasn’t as easy as when I was a young kid. A lot of the girls would just view me as different, even if they weren’t often hateful about it the way the boys were. But I still had some girl friends, and there were a couple friends who were boys who didn’t hate me and think I was weird, and who seemed okay. But not many people. I was pretty isolated, enough for my parents to get worried.”

I stretch and cross the other leg on top and continue. “I think there’s a lot of informal stuff that people with more friends learn without even knowing it, like how to read other people’s expectations and pick up on things that don’t get said out loud. I’m trying to learn that, but growing up I didn’t get as much practice, and I spent a lot more time with my head in a book. In a way, I’m like a foreigner who learned the language but who speaks it kind of formal and stilted, and it’s not how native speakers actually talk. I don’t just mean my actual language, though, that’s just part of it, but, like, I’m comfortable in a classroom but awkward at a party or just hanging out.”

Mark nods. I continue, “I need to be able to reach out to people and make sense to them, but I’m always at a disadvantage. I think people think I’m stuck up in some way, or... I’ve had problems with employers too, I’d show up on time and work as hard as I could and a lot of times they’d say I had some kind of attitude problem. Not the... not the ‘giving you back-talk’ kind of attitude problem, I don’t mean starting arguments or refusing to follow the boss’s orders, but

something that they don't like."

Mark holds his chin in his hand, listening. He nods again. "So... you do accept that it's likely that you have your own internal blocks, your own resistances to changing this pattern that you might have to cope with in order to make any progress with this?"

"Yeah, I think that's very possible. I have my patterns, my ways of doing and saying things, which I'm used to, and I'm also afraid of any kind of reaching out to other people and ending up caring a lot about the outcome, and then failing. Or not being able to get to the point that I'm any good at it. I have stuff in my head, ideas that I think need to have an impact on the world, but they aren't doing any good while they're stuck here in my head."

I sigh. "Honestly, if it were just me, fitting in or not fitting in, me having friends or not having friends, it's enough now, I don't have to fit in everywhere and I don't need everyone as a friend, so I don't need to care about the rest, about everyone else, where I don't fit in. But now since I want a receptive audience, I *need* something from them. I'm asking for their attention. I don't much care for that situation, so it's likely that I *do* close my eyes to stuff."

"Well, I think it's a real breakthrough that you've come to this realization so quickly. It's definitely an encouraging sign of your progress here. I'll talk with the rest of your treatment team about you being interested in pursuing that."

I don't contradict Mark on that, and we conclude our session.

I didn't just come to this realization, though. It's been flickering around in my head over the last two years of reading pieces I'd written at open-mike events and watching my supposedly provocative and insightful thoughts fall out of the PA system speakers and die quietly on the

floor. It's on my mind whenever I sit on my bed at home in frustration, trying to figure out what to try next.

But if the Elk Meadow personnel want to think they've led me to this new self-awareness, it makes sense to let them. It might ameliorate their sense that I'm resisting their help, and with any luck we can move past this adversarial standoff and focus on changes I actually want to look into making.

If they don't want their patients reacting with distrust, they shouldn't make the experience feel so much like being in a cage. The oh-so-enlightened egalitarian approach touted in their literature that impressed my mom and my dad looks mostly like window dressing at close range. Yes, the staff and the patients wear street clothes, but everyone still knows who is a patient and who is on staff. They're the ones with the keys in their pockets, the ones who can open the doors. No, it's not a gothic horror house like Mountain View in Albuquerque, with its barred prison-like windows and straitjackets and seclusion rooms, but they don't actually need bars in our windows; those aren't normal residential screens in our windows, our screens are made of steel mesh of a gauge that you wouldn't be able to put your foot through, or even easily hurl a chair through. *Thanks, Ken Kesey.* And although nobody chases me around with a loaded Thorazine needle or a canvas restraint, the intense attention — with clinical expertise assumed on their side and pathology assumed to exist on mine — feels like a threat.

The majority of the staff seem at least to be well-intentioned, in all fairness, but they are all really oblivious to stuff like this.

\* \* \*

I have a book with me at supper, and so after I finish eating I stay in the cafeteria, reading. I do understand what Emily was driving at, that some of us introverted and self-absorbed people would benefit from interacting instead of just whining about how bad we are at interacting. Reading my book makes me unobtrusive but present, and the cafeteria's the most likely public space.

Over at the next table, Noelle and Valerie have been hanging out since finishing dinner. I'm not exactly with them and not exactly *not* with them. I'm in their vicinity. April meanders in from the hallway, I assume she's returning after having eaten earlier. She's got on a shiny blue top that looks sort of Asian, maybe Indian. Jake comes in from the other hallway with a cup of coffee in his hand. Jake sits at my table. April remains standing. She seems to me to be trying on faces, looking off into the distance in a way that makes me think she's framing whatever it is she wants to say.

After a pause, she slips onto the bench next to Noelle and across from Jake, facing him. "You said some really strong shit about my mom and me. When I was on the hot seat the other day, I mean. That stuff you said about me blaming her and all, and I get that, but I wanna talk about it the way it looks to me." April pauses and draws her shoulders in a bit. She pulls her fingers through her hair and takes a breath before continuing. "It's like shell shock, man. I think I have to be able to be angry at my mom to be able to be angry at how-the-fuck things were. I'm

trying to say there's a difference between 'I *blame* mom so it's her fault', ...and..., 'I come to recognize I kind of got messed up, from how things were between my mom and me'. Whatever I was trying to say that all you guys heard as 'April blames her mom for everything'... I was just trying to say this is where I come from, this me-and-my-mom situation, see? I'm not saying it was all her fault, hey fuck fault, and fuck blame too, just... this is the mess I was in and this is what it was *like* for me, and it sucked."

April gives her dark spiky hair a toss. She had been running her fingers through her hair earlier but this is definitely a toss.

Jake continues looking at her, then nods slowly.

Valerie speaks first. "I get what you're saying. It's like you could be using it as an excuse to stay stuck in that, or you could be dealing with it so you can move on."

"Yeah, it could be that way," Jake says. "But you got to stay honest with yourself, you know."

April leans back against the cafeteria table and it squeaks and rolls back a couple inches. She repositions herself and reaches behind to pull the table back.

Noelle adds, "Mark and Gary and Marie and them, they don't have much truck with excuses. It may seem like everybody come ganging up on you, but you gotta admit, it sounds like you bring up your mom whenever they try to get you to focus on putting your life in order."

A nod and a lopsided smile from April. "I'm not saying I never used her as an excuse like that. I probably did. But, I mean like what Derek said the other day about being in the basement when the lights go out. I can pick what I think is true about this, and if later it seems like I got it



wrong, I can chuck that out and think again, but it seems to me... like maybe I used to *only* bring up my mom as an excuse, and the rest of the time I never wanted to think about what it all *meant*, all those years of thinking I was a waste. But now I gotta think about that. It's a starting point, and everything else came after that."

"No, I get that", Jake acknowledges. He's got his big hands resting on his knees. "I don't think we can move past the stuff that's keeping us back without seeing it clearly, or we won't notice when we start sliding back into it."

I'm feeling pleased that April cited me, and gratified to be included. I say, "You're making an important distinction here, between two ways of looking at the same thing, and I think that's a special skill, because a lot of time once we see something one way, or get told by other folks that that's how it is, that's the only way we can look at it." I wince, thinking I expressed that rather badly. I like writing better than talking, you can edit what you said and say it better. But I'm doing it decently well anyway, at least some of the time.

Noelle says, "April, look, you don't seem mad, like you're thinking we dumped on you in psychodrama and you're pissed about it. This shit isn't easy to hear, and you took it in. Now you hand this back to us, and it could go down that Gary and them still say you're still being defensive... but hey, girl, this takes courage too."

I wonder if staff knows we talk among ourselves like this, whether they'd think that's good, because it means the things they've pushed us to think about are going to carry over into our ongoing thinking. Seems like they should, but back at Mountain View some of the staff acted

like us talking with each other and thinking about our issues and progress was going to mess up our therapy, and that we should just park ourselves in front of the TV set and be vegetables between staff-run sessions. Elk Meadow is more sophisticated. I'm still trying to decide if they're better in a way that truly counts. I wouldn't be amazed if they'd planned out exactly how much of our day to lock down into a schedule, to leave us with just enough time to repeat the lessons but not quite enough to veer off very far in our own directions with it.

= July 23, 1982 (Day Five) =

Today's AA meeting revolves around the first of the twelve steps, "admitting that we are powerless over alcohol." Gary Stevens wants to define my disinclination to make such an admission as a case of me being in denial about it. This was predictable. If I'm surprised about anything it's that they're only starting in with me about it now.

I'm glad I got Mark Raybourne for individual counseling and not Gary; Mark certainly has his shortcomings but Gary annoys me more. I think he does it on purpose, in fact: irritating the clientele as a method of prompting them to change their position or behavior. Gary has light brown hair and a beak of a nose; he's strutting around in an unbuttoned dress shirt like a rooster: behold, I have a chest!

"Wake up and smell the coffee", Gary tells me. "We've all been right where you're at, saying we don't see ourselves as alcoholics, don't hear what people are telling us about our

drinking, and refusing to say it. Just like the three monkeys, you know? See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil. But you know that's not gonna fly here."

"I understand why this is the first step for an alcoholic coming to terms with their drinking problem", I reply. "You can't address a problem until you can acknowledge that you've got it. But that doesn't mean that everyone who doesn't acknowledge having such a problem is actually someone who does, but who hasn't yet made that first step."

"Talk plainly", Gary Stevens urges me. "Don't be playing word games with us here."

"I thought I was being plain. Let's try again, shall we? All alcoholics who don't recognize that they're alcoholics are in denial. But not all people who don't consider themselves alcoholics are alcoholics in denial."

"Are you talking about yourself?"

"I haven't gotten that far yet. I'm talking in the abstract."

"Well don't talk in the abstract. Talk about yourself."

"Hi, I'm Derek, and I'm not an alcoholic." *Pause.* "This is where you all say 'Hello, Derek'; that was your cue. I have never experienced myself as powerless over alcohol because I haven't made an effort to quit drinking and then failed to do so. I haven't made any effort to modify my alcohol consumption behaviors. You're welcome to make the case that I *should*, but you don't even know what they are. It's not currently a concern of mine, though, and you don't get to define my concerns. If I had decided that I should modify my drinking habits, and then found that I couldn't, then it would make sense to consider that I was powerless over alcohol."

"You're very clever", Emily pronounces, "but you're pointing out something that we've all

heard and most of us have said, and it doesn't mean your drinking isn't a problem."

Party line. Just on the verge of exaggeration. I still can't tell if she's into this or if she's making fun of them.

\* \* \*

"All right", I tell my psychodrama group, "Here's the scene I came up with. I'll need one person to play my dad and one to be my mom. I'm going to propose that y'all buy me a piano, since you've spent a lot more than that sending me to college and other schools which didn't work out, and I think this might work out. And you argue that I'm being self-centered and irresponsible to think you owe me that after you've wasted so much money sending me to college and other schools and it didn't work out. And then I'll say I could have a career as a musician and you say that's not practical and it's just a hobby, and we can probably improvise from there."

"Oh, that sounds good", Marie says, clapping her hands. "Yeah, so a little bit about what your parents are like. Is he loud? Is he one of those 'my way or the highway' dads? Your mom, is she going to be worried you're making a mistake?"

"She's worried and hurt, for sure, but also the one more likely to make an absolute statement right off the bat. He's all about showing he's really listening and really cares, as long as I eventually accept his conclusions. No yelling. If they can make *me* yell, then I lose for acting

immature. We're southern, but we kind of act like yankees from those black and white movies from the fifties. No one gets to yell or stomp feet when we argue."

Jeremy makes a deep appreciative nod. "Oh, that tells me a lot about you. Yeah, I can see that, that perfectly fits you. All right, Ronald, you want to take a go at being Derek's dad? Noelle, you up for playing the mom?"

As typical of psychodrama, after running the scenario, I, as "director", coach Noelle and Ronald towards some modifications in how they portray my folks; Marie and Jeremy and the other participating patients all make comments and suggestions. I am shooting for more accuracy; they, of course, are seeing what's hitting my buttons and evoking a response from me playing myself, and trying to flush more of that out. Then we run it again with the changes.

After that comes the feedback section —

"I gotta say, I have to side with your folks", Jake says. "I mean, it's their money and you don't get to tell them how to spend it. It's like if I buy you a Christmas present. You can't say 'No, you have to get me this instead', right?"

"Well, I agree with that", I reply. "I'm an adult. I don't seem to be very *good* at it, but I'm past the age of being entitled to support from them. So it's not that they owe me. But it's very frustrating that when it was their idea they were all for paying for me to get a future, and I tried their idea; but it didn't work out. So I see a direction I want to try, I think I can write music and play it on the piano and sing, and a piano is a lot cheaper than a college tuition. But *that* they won't pay for."

"So you *do* think they owe you", April says. "You're saying since they paid for college they

owe you a piano. You know, dude, that doesn't make a whole lotta sense."

I need to pause and run that through a few times. I know it looks like April's got me quite stuck, but never mind that. I'm occasionally making 'please wait' gestures to them all. Finally

—

"It's really *not* about them owing me, but how it feels, the emotional side, is a lot the same as that of being owed something. Something like 'I wanted something better out of this, and I expected better from you'. I'm *disappointed* in them. Oh, and it's mutual. What I get from them is 'We're so disappointed, we had such high hopes'. I'm owed something more abstract than a piano. They feel like they're owed something too."

"Okay, I hear you", April answers. And other people in the room are exchanging the kind of glance I associate with *Whoa, Derek just made sense*. I often don't, to people, but I do land one occasionally.

"Derek", Marie suggests, "I want you to say something to your parents here. Take some time, but say what you'd actually say to them if you had them here to listen."

Following Marie's advice, I do take a moment to assemble my thoughts into words. Then —

"You get worried and disappointed whenever these plans for my future don't work out, so having a plan that works is very important to you. And you want me to take it seriously, so that, ideally, having one that works is very important to me, too. But you mostly haven't included me in the planning before the 'pick from these options' stage. The one major exception was me saying I wanted to learn auto mechanics at vo-tech instead of going to college, and that's the one course of study I finished successfully. The jobs I could find weren't enough to let me move out

on my own, but it wasn't a failed career yet and still you pitched to me to go back and try college again, that was your idea...

"Sorry", I interrupt myself, "I've gone off on a tangent. I want to go back to the being worried and disappointed thing. That's really what I want to talk about. I'm doing my most focused thinking about what I actually should be doing with myself, I'm taking it very seriously. And you addressing me like I'm irresponsible and unconcerned about my future is getting to be annoying. Not everything that hasn't worked out pleasantly in my life is my fault. That doesn't necessarily make it somebody *else's* fault, but it's still true."

\* \* \*

There was that moment in the psychodrama when I'd had that feeling of connection to the roomful of people I was speaking to. When I say *making sense*, I don't mean "Hello, my name is Derek" or "Well, if you want to get on Interstate 40, take Interstate 25 south until you get to Albuquerque", those things make sense, but they're not new thoughts, they're familiar patterns; I'm really talking about expressing something that they've never heard put into words before, but talking *about* everyday familiar life and its aspects, so there's both a spark of surprise and a spark of recognition.

I have a lot of stuff I want to talk about that I think could hit people that way. Comedians do that. Tickling that spark of recognition, you know? I'm all serious and pompously full of

intentions and I wouldn't make a good comedian, but I want to hit people that way too. I came here hoping to sharpen this, so show me how to reach people in such a way that I can make that happen more often.

You want to know what I want to do with my life, Daddy, Mama? I want to be a political social activist. I want to start a movement. But I don't know how.

Because a lot of the time when I try to talk to people about this stuff, those sparks don't happen. People think I'm trying to be interesting to make myself popular. Some of them think I'm trying to be interesting and failing rather badly at it. Others assume I want to prompt a debate, and the ideas are just startup fodder to fuel a good debate. And a whole lot of people just think I don't make any sense.

So yes...I had a good experience in psychodrama. I felt heard, but I also got challenged, I mean a legitimate challenge to my own way of looking at something personal. For all that Elk Meadow is frustrating, I could actually get something real out of this, something that I need.

I walk to the short hall with the little piano and sit down. The bench creaks. Piano is a Yamaha, a popular practice-room spinet, glossy black, straight lines, functional. I take out a pen and some scratch paper — the back side of someone's discarded Elk Meadow schedule filched from the trash can — and shake the pen vigorously to get it to flow more evenly. An hour later I have four verses and a piano part for a new song called "Waves." It's specifically about being *here*, and the challenge to stay vulnerable enough to get something out of it while simultaneously being tough enough to engage with it and not be controlled by the people who like to push other



folks' buttons a little more than they should.

Another half-hour later, I'm singing it and playing it and totally getting into it. It's got passion and fragility, intensity belted out on the high notes in places and in other spots the piano ringing a suspended chord and the voice part shimmery and delicate on top of it. I picked well when I chose the key of A major, I sound damn good on those high E's.

I once again get the sense that there is another person standing behind me. The way the hallway is set up, anyone from our unit walking past the piano comes from behind and to the right of it. So anyone coming to hear would come up from behind me.

Perhaps me becoming aware of her is expressed in some way that she picks up on; Ellen steps forward. Green and white cotton shirt, sash tied around the waist, arms loosely crossed. I pause, and she speaks. "You wrote a song about being in here."

"Yeah, I did."

"I thought you hated it here", she says, glaring at me suspiciously.

"It's complicated. I could get some good help here and really grow, but the stakes are high and they're *my* stakes. I'm here for a consult and some help but I'm in charge. I'm not turning my mind or my life over to anyone else."

"Everyone wants to take over mine. I mostly don't let them but I fuck everything up when I'm in control."

"Do they fuck things up for you any less when you *do* let them?"

"No. I just sometimes get tired of fighting, and fine, you steer, I don't really care. It's better in here." With that, Ellen nods and walks back down the hall. It's the least hostile she's ever

spoken to me.

I return to working on my new piece.

\* \* \*

“What do we think of Derek’s growth and progress at this point?”, Irma asks the full community group. I am this evening’s subject matter because there were complaints about the “cram” posters still being on my door, and then other people (Jake, April, Noelle) actually rose to my defense, saying I was participating here in earnest and not just insulting everyone.

My counselor Mark is recognized and stands, looking contemplative. “Derek has reached some real important understandings, and I think we would all acknowledge that. His biggest barrier is that he intellectualizes and avoids his personal issues a lot of the time.”

Gary Stevens seconds all of that and adds, “He hides behind a lot of ten dollar words and ivory tower blather when he wants to avoid addressing things that others have brought to his attention.”

George is the first resident to speak. He states, “I think Derek is coming around, but he still, his first instinct is to bullshit, and he still goes with that a lot of the time.” George, a Black man probably in his upper twenties from the look of him, always seems a bit amused. I remember him saying the other day that maybe Ellen doesn’t like me because of my sexual orientation, spoken with the same sardonic smile.

Joanne's take on me is, "I think Derek really likes to hold himself apart. He's afraid of not being accepted so he holds back and says 'I'm not really one of you', and also I think he's very unhappy with himself".

Jeremy from psychodrama says, "Derek has a lot of courage, and he's very smart. Some of what comes off as intellectualizing is him processing. I think he gets there eventually and sees what he needs to see, but like anyone, it's hard going at first."

Emily is recognized and states, "Derek distracts from his own issues by talking about social causes and politics. It's a fancy way of saying everything is somebody else's fault. That's not him processing, that's him refusing to process and I think we should call him on it more often."

I have had the opportunity on previous occasions to see other residents put on the hot seat in community group. Ellen. Ronald. There seems to be a sort of script for how this goes: the mostly critical comments eventually make the targeted person angry in places where they feel like somebody has misrepresented how things are, and they start defending themselves, then they get piled on for being defensive and get pushed to admit they're guarding themselves against the truth, after which there's a sort of reconciliation and it gets called a growth moment.

I can look out of one cynical eyeball and one earnestly trusting one and see the same thing in stereoscopic vision: it isn't good to respond until I've heard everything these people have to say and given it thoughtful consideration. There might be truth, partial or otherwise, in some of these observations. But it also makes sense to thwart the script and not rise to the bait and put a bunch of defensiveness on display.

There are a few more people who add their agreement to the notion that I intellectualize, and seconding what Emily had said about me invoking social and political situations when talking about my stuff, that doing that was a way of not dealing with my issues. I nod occasionally to show I've been listening.

It winds down. No one seems to have anything else to add.

Dr. Barnes asks, "Well, Derek, do you have any response to all this feedback? I know you have some thoughts to share with us." Slow and deliberate, he sounds like he's willing to listen to my side. His hands are open, palms upward, and he spreads them apart from each other in inquiry.

"I think...", I begin, "... that for everyone, resistance to threatening ideas can take the form of clinging onto ways we've already got, ways we're already comfortable thinking of those matters. And we shove information and experiences *into* those boxes even when they don't really fit, to avoid dealing with them. For me, a lot of my familiar boxes are intellectual. I'm sorry if I come across sometimes like some stuffy stilted college professor who thinks he can learn life all from reading books. I don't think that intellectual concepts are... you know, like ...something's wrong with them automatically. It's not that they're intellectual and use a bunch of complex concepts and, how did Gary put it? 'Ten dollar words'. That's not what makes it defensive. It's the act of not listening. Thinking that if I can put my thoughts into words better than you can, they must be better thoughts. That's arrogance. And, to make it personal, thinking I've already heard what *you're* saying before, so I don't need to listen to all of it. I've caught myself doing that a lot. So have some of you, I guess, and you should keep on calling me on it. I'll try to listen more.

“Now, the thing about bringing up social and political matters when I talk about myself... it’s one thing if somebody says ‘Don’t complain about my temper tantrums and missing work, that asshole Ronald Reagan got elected’, or ‘Why are you after me for my drinking and drug habits, what about the exploitation of South Africa?’, then yeah, that’s deflecting, and I agree it isn’t directly relevant, or not likely to be. But when I bring up political content, it’s almost always because I *think* it really *does* matter, and sometimes it does. Like a person being asked why they can’t manage to keep a job might bring up racism, if there’s discrimination and a belief out there that people of their race are the wrong people to give those kinds of jobs to. That doesn’t automatically mean that they’re right, or that you have to agree with them about everything, but it isn’t irrelevant.”

“In here, we want you to focus on you”, Dr. Barnes counters. “You can’t go out and fix the world and solve its problems when you haven’t dealt with the mess in your own life.”

“My own life isn’t just me by myself. When someone asks me to describe how things are for me, they mean my situation. Me in a context, me in an environment, with other people and what they expect and how I deal with them — which might be *badly*, it might be stuff I need to work on, but that’s social and political right there, the expectations and the roles and how things are set up.”

“I think Derek is intellectualizing again, don’t you?”, Barnes responds.

“If I am”, I retort, “I’m doing so relevantly, and calling it intellectualizing doesn’t make it wrong. Or defensive, or avoiding or whatever.”

“I think you’re just afraid to confront your own worst enemy, because unfortunately he isn’t

out there with expectations and roles, he's right there where you are."

"And I think you and your staff like to ask us where we're at, and I'll give an answer like 'I am a male nursing student on a medical floor in Athens Georgia' and you'll say, 'No, don't talk about that outside stuff, we want to know where *you* are at', so I'll say 'I am a lonely shy stubborn sissy person trying to cope with a world I find strange', and you say, 'No, don't talk about the strange world and how you're different or special, we want to know where *you* are at'... so I'm reduced to saying 'Well, I'm directly above the center of the earth, with my head in the air and my feet on the ground'. Even that includes context. The only me that there *is* is in a context. It's the only *where* that I've got to offer you, and *that's* where I'm at!"

"Derek...you think you know everything and have nothing to learn from anybody, because you're used to spewing that intellectual nonsense and having everyone accept it and ignore that it doesn't make any sense." Dr. Barnes pauses to spread his arms, as if to gather and embrace the room. "You need to learn when you aren't the expert. You are in Elk Meadow Clinical Retreat, which is a state-of-the-art recovery and rehabilitation facility, and I have advanced degrees and the advantages of years of practice. You aren't the first person to come in here and try to snow us with a stream of pseudo-educated word soup.

"Now I suggest you listen to the people in this room. Many of us are experts at this, and others are your own colleagues and fellow sufferers, and yet you'd rather stuff your fingers in your ears. You haven't solved your problems so far, so, since you've opted to be here, why don't you let us take a crack at it? You know, I have an international reputation for the work I've done in my field, and people come from all over to listen to my lectures. Or to apply to be in this

facility. We save people here. Let us help you.”

I shake my head, disappointed that Barnes isn’t actually listening to me. Guess he just likes to adopt a pose that comes across as thoughtful and sincere. I tell him, “I’m here to listen and consider what you and anyone else here has to say, but the name of my treatment team leader is Derek Turner. The final decisions about what’s in my best interests, therapeutic or otherwise, are mine. I can’t take responsibility for my life if I don’t have authority over it, because responsibility and authority are two words for the same thing.”

“Oh, listen to...”

“You’re!!” — I actually manage to cut him off — “used to controlling people in here with reward and punishment. You’ve learned how to isolate us so that the only sources of approval or disapproval are people who are all afraid to express anything that you haven’t ratified. Your tiers of privilege are all about residents proving that they can be an obedient part of Dr. Barnes’ echo chamber. Anyone who doesn’t echo doesn’t advance to the higher levels. It’s how dogs and rats are trained, with rewards and withholding of rewards and penalties and so on. Well guess what? I do need approval and acceptance eventually, from someone, but I don’t need it today, and I don’t need it from you. Or from anyone else whose strings you’re pulling.”

After that, there comes a long queue of people, primarily but not limited to staffers, taking their turns describing all of what I’d just said as a continuation of my stubborn denial of my own issues, and a typical example of me intellectualizing.

I listen patiently and smile a lot and reply seldom, occasionally stating that I’ll give what

they just said all the attention that it deserves.

I do see a few people sitting more quietly and looking thoughtful. I might be making sense to someone.

\* \* \*

After group, I walk past Dr. Barnes' office door and read the black nameplate on his door.  
"Dr. James F. Barnes, M.D., Pc."

Then I go into my room, take out a sheet of typing paper and a standard black ink pen and write "Derek S. Turner, H.B., Pt." in hollow outlined letters, and fill in all around outside the letter borders with the black ink to the approximate dimensions of a nameplate. I then cut out that black rectangle with its white letters and carefully tape it to the door below my "cram" posters.

= July 24, 1982 (Day Six) =

I wake up recalling my conversation yesterday with Ellen out by the piano and that somewhat cryptic final comment about it being better in here. Now I realize what she might have been telling me: *"It's actually even more controlling out there, the life I have to go back*



to.”

Okay. I admit that this place is not the most bluntly coercive place I’ve ever had to cope with.

But they *are* paying close attention, *and* constantly seeking control. For the amount of communication taking place, they should be doing more of the listening.

After showering and dressing, I pad out to the cafeteria to get breakfast. I realize I miss cooking for myself, preparing what I specifically want, the way I like it. I want the base of a well-toasted English muffin, with strips of bacon, then an egg fried solid in the bacon grease carefully layered on top of the bacon, and sharp cheddar cheese on top of that, broiled in the oven until the cheese melts, then several shots of tabasco sauce and topped with the other side of the muffin.

More to the point, I want what is familiar to me and to my preference. I want the experience of doing for myself and living my own life as I’ve chosen it.

All institutions like this have to deal somehow with how they displace all that and impose something foreign onto the people who come to them for treatment. They don’t really have a choice about providing all these services in an environment that the patient is already comfortable in. It has to be a new and unfamiliar place. What’s fascinating, and disturbing, is that in Mountain View two years ago and now here again in Elk Meadow, I don’t see a pattern of therapists helping people settle in first and get comfortable so we can speak from some semblance of a position of familiarity and confidence. Instead, if anything, it’s tended to feel

like they deliberately strip new arrivals to the bone to throw us off-balance as much as possible.

\* \* \*

Dr. James Barnes doesn't always appear at our morning unit meetings; after all, there are other units on other wings of this place, all of which are holding morning meetings, so he rotates, doing the rounds. We had him yesterday.

The meeting rooms we use are U-shaped, with shallow risers to elevate the back rows, a half-dozen folding chairs up front for people who know they are going to be speaking, and a wooden lectern that people sometimes stand behind while they speak, although a lot of times people stand in front of it so they can walk around more.

That's where Dr. Barnes is pacing as we file in, Irma and Mark following behind in his wake as he turns and stalks. He looks annoyed and impatient.

As I'm watching him scowling and prowling, he looks in my direction. Recognizes me.

"Hey everybody, look who we have with us today", he exclaims. "Look who has decided to grace us with his presence this morning. People, we have with us 'Derek Turner, HB, Pt.', right there in the flesh. ..." he pauses and stares from a face twisted with theatrical concern and pity.

"What does that stand for, Derek? Habitual patient?"

I can't out-boom him, but I speak as resonantly as I can, trying to enunciate crisply: "Human being, comma, patient."

“You want credentials, and credibility. That’s understandable. I have both, Derek. You have neither. You haven’t managed to make it through your freshman year of college after two tries, but you still need to think of yourself as a great master of psychology and social science, and I think you really need to ask yourself why. What you’re compensating for. Do you know how many years I’ve studied? I’ve spent years building this therapy center, to help people like you. In order to be able to provide that help, I attended and graduated from medical school, where I learned research methods and the principles of medical intervention, and after four years of that I put in another four years doing my residency, gaining experience and learning at the side of established medical professionals, and another two years training on top of *that* to specialize in psychiatric behavioral services.

“People respect me! Do you want people’s respect, Derek? Can you even imagine being respected the way I am? I get telephone calls from newspapers asking for my opinion, asking if they can quote me! I built Elk Meadow to offer services to people, people like you, who can’t function in society, who might *never* be able to function in society, and I have put many of those people back on the street to live lives they could only *dream* of.”

Barnes turns and gestures with both palms, “So... *you* took out your crayons and made a pathetic little homemade sign for your door.” “Who do you think you’re going to impress? Look around! Nobody cares what you think!” I stare back at him wordlessly. I do look around, and I notice a roomful of other rather stunned-looking people taking sidelong looks back and forth to each other. Barnes continues, “Everyone here at Elk Meadow is embarrassed for you! We bend over backwards to try everything in our power to reach you, to include you, to help you

find the courage to take your life in your hands and do something with it, but, no, you persist in throwing the lifeline back in our face! And you smirk and preen, you're so proud of yourself for what you've done. You're like a little toddler showing off that he made a dookey, 'Come see, come see Mommy, come see Daddy, look what I put in the toilet bowl'. I'm glad you're proud of your accomplishments, but sadly nobody else thinks as highly of them as you do, and sooner or later you're going to have to come around to recognizing that. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have an institution to run and I'm needed elsewhere." With that, Barnes whirls and exits through the side hallway door.

Following several silent awkward beats, Irma *ahemms* and starts the morning meeting, which I scarcely take any notice of.

I file out with the others and end up walking in the corridor with several hospital staff quickly coming my direction. My counselor Mark and Gary from AA and NA walk next to me. Gary says to me, "I bet you were one of those students who likes to provoke the teacher. I can't high-five you for being an asshole, but I gotta say, I never seen him so upset."

Gary peels off down an adjoining hallway while I'm still processing that backhanded compliment. From somewhere, Marie from psychodrama also comes alongside.

Mark speaks first though. "You definitely pissed Barnes off. I'm not seeing a lot of good judgment in action here. I mean, think about it, now the guy who runs the place where you live isn't pleased with you, and that could be a problem."

Marie chimes in, "Yeah, watch out. Seriously."

\* \* \*

Biofeedback is next on my schedule. It briefly occurs to me to miss it. I don't. I settle into my chair to watch the blips on the screen. It feels like a safe place to relax and process what just happened.

Biofeedback chairs are among the better chairs in the place, they're professional office chairs with supportive backs and height adjustment switches, lightly padded, swivel seat on five roller balls, comfortable arm rests. I sit down in the nice chair and they hook the sensors on. There's a display with dots that move against the backdrop of scale lines, and a dim trace of where each dot has been, its trajectory, with several dots and their patterns all fitting on the same screen, color coded, superimposed. They have names for the things being measured, but those names reflect the process of the making of the measurement, not really expressing what the data itself means. Means to whom? I'm in here, in this body, so potentially it has meaning to me, but I still have no frame of reference to understand what I'm watching. Nurse's training didn't cover the specifics of these measures.

Meanwhile, more cynically, I guess, you could say I am watching what process or function is being served by us being in biofeedback. The desired effect on *us*, the change targets. We're the people they think of as here to be changed. The cynical eye isn't seeing what the institution is getting out of this any more clearly than the trusting side understands the moving colored line/dots on the screen.

My mind is still on Barnes and the morning meeting. Maybe I should have answered back and defended myself, but his attack seemed so over-the-top. His usual style is to smile benignly and insert sharp little verbal needles and make his intended victims lose *their* cool, but he sure hadn't been doing that this morning.

Not just that, but he already targeted me during the big community group meeting yesterday evening, and normally he'd be on another unit, and then when he was next on Unit 4 again, move on to someone else. For him to come at me again this morning makes it look like a personal vendetta.

Ultimately, I probably handled it perfectly by just standing there, not responding. That had been accidental, I mean it wasn't a carefully calibrated thing I'd decided to do or anything. I hadn't been the only one nonplussed — I'd been in a roomful of rather shocked-looking people looking back and forth at each other while Barnes did his rant.

But yeah, I think my silence in the face of his hissy fit allowed his behavior to speak for itself.

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After the lab technicians unhook me, I head towards the cafeteria for lunch. Jake is on the line, sees me, says "Whoa, that was fuckin' weird this morning."

I nod. "Yeah, I hadn't expected that. I mean, not quite that, at any rate."

"So what's this about? What's he saying you did?"

“Well, I have some taped-up stuff on my door, I do that the same way that folks with cars have bumper stickers”, I explain. “I mean, when I was in college, in the dorms, we taped stuff up on our doors, and I got in the habit. Like, back in Athens, on my bedroom door I have a hand-lettered sign in all caps that says “IF I THOUGHT IT WOULD RESULT IN YOU UNDERSTANDING THE THOUGHTS IN MY HEAD I WOULD GLADLY PLUCK MY HEAD FROM MY SHOULDERS AND DASH IT OPEN AT YOUR FEET; I WOULD GIVE MY LIFE TO ATTAIN A MEANINGFUL COMMUNICATION WITH YOU.” Jake stares at me and I belatedly realize that perhaps that particular example wasn’t making me more relatable. “Anyway”, I continue, “I made a reply to his fancy office nameplate, with a nameplate of my own, with my name and my current qualifications, which are ‘H.B.’ for ‘human being’ and ‘Pt.’ for ‘patient’. Ballpoint and paper, black out the parts that aren’t the letters, so you leave white letters. Taped it on my door.”

Jake nods. Companionable silence for awhile.

Jake looks at me, contemplating. “So you’re into girls. Like, who? Is there anyone here you think is hot or cute”?

“Nobody I got any kind of flirty stuff going on with, but if you mean just looking from the outside and saying who seems like... you know, like someone you’d like to have the chance to see where things go..., well, April. The other person, *maybe*, is Ellen, weirdly enough.” This all feels odd. I never really got into the habit of discussing my attractional portfolio with other males. It’s weird that I feel comfortable talking to Jake about it.

*Hmm, now see?*, remarks an internal self-questioning voice.

That's a sign you've formed preconceptions. Thinking of yourself as essentially one of the girls. Now you react to male experience as foreign experience. But meanwhile you want female people to *not* react to *your* experience as foreign experience. So you don't want to be *othered* but it's okay when you do it?

Yeah, of *course* you can be a genuine exception to the rule, and hence to the stereotypes. That can make you not able to occupy the roles. I don't mean roles like The Daddy and The Mommy or for that matter The Breadwinner and The Mommy. I mean roles like Clark Gable as Rhett Butler or Sally Field as Norma Rae and so forth, examples of "check out who this person is and how they behave" that are shared complex character stereotypes, and they're gendered for us. Those are roles. They are representative person-shapes we already hold in our minds, waiting for an appropriate person to pour into them and get interpreted as one of that type of character that we happen to know personally. Archetypes. It's an oversimplification, yet it's also a starting point in getting to know someone.

But since I'm complaining that the roles don't fit me, maybe it's not fair to then pigeonhole other people into role-identities of the type I hate being sorted into. And maybe I'm doing that whenever I see other males as a unified other.

Jake, maleness aside, doesn't seem so foreign. He is now looking at me oddly again, because I've gotten all distracted inside my head.. "...you get what I'm saying? I'm not doing a 'hands off' thing, like 'she's my girl', I'm just saying, we been together, April and me, and that probably



isn't gonna change. That's all."

"Oh... well like I said, it was just a sense of 'Hmm', like if it could go in that direction, hey, maybe that could be good'. I like April. So, umm... good for you two to be together. Especially in this place."

We wander over towards the lounge. Ronald and April and Joe join us. Now it feels awkward that I just discussed April with Jake. Why do male people expect to compare notes? No, that's actually not what's occupying my attention. Why do we want to be private about who we find fascinating and cute and have interest in? Also, why do people feel entitled to ask a lot of invasive personal questions about that stuff?

\* \* \*

Hanging out in the kitchen, I describe to April and Ronald and the others what I would ideally change about Elk Meadow; I like some of what they've got, but there are severe deficits and issues, too, and I'm as entitled to evaluate them as they are to evaluate me.

I'm self-conscious lately about being pretentious. But I'm fired up and people kind of seem to be listening to me for a change.

"If I was in charge of setting up a place that people could go to and get help with things in their thinking or things in their feeling that they say they need help with... you know, first off I would still want to have a place where people confront their issues. Taking it seriously. But they would have the responsibility of identifying their issues."

I pivot from facing left to facing right. It's easier to speak out loud when I move around. "So first, when they come in, give them a wide range of clothes they can dress in, or, of course, what they brought in with them or anything else they want to bring in later. And in Arts and Crafts, they'd have a chance to develop anything they want, so they can communicate unobstructed. And there should be typewriters. And video recorders. And tape decks. But most important, there's the front door. And you got a pass that says you're a resident so you can go out whenever you feel like it and get back in at will. Go to the library and read books. Then go to the local movie house and catch what's playing. Go hang out at the pub. Interact with people who aren't here in the clinic. The clinic shouldn't be your whole life. But the door is open so you come on back later on."

"Yeah, you know, I'm tired of them thinking I don't take this seriously", Ronald tells us later on.

"If you aren't taking it seriously", I reply, "I don't know who else could qualify." I'm less convinced than he is that it's entirely a complimentary assessment. But... hey, you know, it does make sense to think of it that way, that here at Elk Meadow there's a competitive How Seriously Do You Take It discussion that's part of your progress and levels assessment.

Hence Emily, now that I think of it. Yeah, of *course* she's doing that. It isn't a farcical mockery, it's willful obedience. *I'll be exactly who you want me to be, just as competitively as humanly possible.*

April says, “We can’t ever do enough to please them. Not quite. We’ve always gotta owe them, something where we let them down.”

I say, “They always say it’s for us, that we’re letting ourselves down.”

April rolls her eyes. “Of course, they always say that!.”

April departs. We have sex-segregated wings and I head back with the guys. We pass an exterior door. I don’t know what prompts me to look down, maybe I catch something from my peripheral vision, but the little tongue of the electrically disabled door is retracted, as if someone were pushing on the bars to get out. “Oh, hey, check this out”, I say. The others stop. Glances go back and forth.

“Naaaw, man....”, Joe says. “It probably sets off an alarm the moment you try it.”

The brass-colored push bars have a loose chain wrapped around them on the inside. I figure with nothing stopping the unlatched door’s outward motion except the length of the chain, I could slither through comfortably enough.

Jake says, “I don’t think the alarm knows the door is being opened if it can’t tell the door latch is pushed in like that. So yeah, if we can fit through there, we could be on the town, man. Go see a movie.”

Ronald glances out to the portion of the outdoors we can see from the window. “Where you gonna go? I don’t know anybody around here.”

“I actually do”, I say. “My parents know a couple, they were both college students of his from back when he was a professor. They’re really decent folks, so I might go pay them a visit.”

Joe tries the door carefully, and we watch as he presses the latchbar and pushes the door slowly open. He makes an “after you” gesture to the rest of us.

Ronald winces and says, “If I had anyone I knew around here.”

Jake looks at me. “I should fuckin’ do this, and I don’t see nothing wrong with it. I mean, don’t really get all stuck in the notion I do, cuz that isn’t how it is. I don’t think I’m going to, not this time, but I’ve done stuff like this in the past and I don’t regret it.”

So it’s just me. I squirm past the chain.

It’s kind of spontaneous but it fits my mood. I shouldn’t dignify the situation by describing it as a plan. But I am out, I feel like being out, and I’d been feeling like I needed to double-underline my voluntary status. I don’t *have* to play. I don’t *have* to be here.

And yes... I am wary of Dr. Barnes.

I stride across the Elk Meadow turf as if I have authority and a known destination. It’s actually amazing where you can go if you charge forth and behave as if you have authority and a known destination.

Bleached bluewhite sky and blast-furnace dry. Lots of Houston sun.

I take the left, not knowing where I am but liking the sense of a built-up area in that direction. Another twenty minutes’ walking takes me past a grocery store parking lot and a post office and a couple of strip malls. The second one has a multiplex movie house showing *Tron*, *Grease II*, and *Author! Author!*; after a few moments’ consideration, I go on in and buy myself a ticket for the afternoon showing of *Author! Author!* and get myself a small buttered popcorn.

\* \* \*

When the movie lets out, I ask the ticket seller if there are any pay phones around, and she points me to one in a corner of the carpeted lobby. In my wallet I find the folded slip with emergency contact numbers on it, and sure enough, I have a phone number for the Harrisons, former students from my dad's days as a college professor. My parents had said if anything goes wrong, I could contact them.

Pickup on the third ring. "Hi, is this Melinda Harrison? I'm Derek Turner. I don't know if you remember me... oh, you do? Oh, they told you I'd be here in town for awhile..."

"No, nothing's wrong... I'm out on a day pass, I just felt like a change of scenery... I was wondering if maybe you and Reggie would have any interest in having dinner together somewhere, if you knew a place around here..."

Melinda suggests I come eat dinner with them at their home, and when I ask about directions for getting there, says Reggie will come pick me up. She recognizes the movie theatre and knows where it is.

Reggie pulls into the parking lot. I doubt I would have recognized him if I'd just run into him out of context, but when he gets out of the silver Datsun and looks around for someone who might be waiting, and waves at me, he looks familiar although we haven't seen each other in many years. Curly dark hair, copper-colored wireframe glasses over a short wide nose. I walk

over and we shake hands. I get in on the passenger's side.

"Well...how have you been doing?", he asks me.

"A mixed bag, I suppose, but overall mostly positive. I've learned a lot about myself in the last couple years, and I'm much happier and more confident than I was before. I spent years worrying that there was something different about me that was like defective and pathetic. Or if I stopped thinking so, it meant I was in denial that I was different, and then it would keep smacking me in the face, you know, other people would react in ways that showed *they* saw me as different, ...and maybe pathetic and all that. I've come around to thinking I'm different and proud of my differences, and so I'm not running away from it or worrying about it any more, and when people act like that, I know it's because they don't know any better. I don't deserve it but it isn't personal either, it's a kind of prejudice that some people have."

"Wow, that sounds really heavy. I'm glad for you if that has made you happy, and I have to say, you do sound a lot more confident than I remember you."

"I'm here in a program that may help me get a handle on how to communicate better and be less isolated in the world. I guess my folks probably told you something about that?"

"They did say you were here in town to be in some kind of program, yeah. I'm not sure I understood what it was all about."

I'm probably dispensing more of me than I have any right to assume he asked for. Okay, *definitely* doing that, even though it's Reggie, and I just fell into talking to him easily because he has always been comfortable to talk to, he was a good listener when I was nine. But I also have reasons. I've never been good at small talk when there's real stuff that's right there on

everybody's mind, that everyone knows about, or at least knows enough about that it's defining their perceptions. It was probably explained to the Harrisons as 'Derek is going into a drug rehab facility', so I don't have a lot of reason to act self-conscious about the whole business of working on myself.

After a handful of suburban turns, we pull into a driveway and I follow Reggie into the one-story orange-bricked house.

"Hi, Derek", Melinda greets me. A Dorothy Hamill sort of haircut, perky little face. She says, "Yes, of course I remember you! We sat on the couch when your dad hosted a Physics Department party, and you told me all about your Ralph Vaughan Williams album that you'd just gotten."

"Yeah... I've still got it somewhere. Been played about a zillion times but not too many scratches. That would have been around fifth grade. And a couple years later, you two came to visit us in New Mexico, too, and we went hiking."

"Oh, yes, and I got lost! I thought all of you were on up ahead of me and somehow I got ahead of you instead, and I kept trying to catch up."

Melinda begins fixing onion burgers. Formica countertop, some bowls and cutting boards. I offer to help, which at first she turns down, but when I offer more specifically to slice the onions, she passes me a knife and wooden cutting board.

"So", I ask, "what do you folks do nowadays? Did you stick with physics?"

"We did... in fact, I'm working in the aerospace industry here. And Reggie is on faculty at the university with a research grant. Things have worked out pretty well for us."

She slices up jalapeño peppers to put on our burgers and we all sit around the table, eating burgers with salsa and chips.

As Melinda dips her tortilla chip into the salsa, she comments, “I remember when Edward, Dr. Turner — your dad, I mean — was having trouble getting the stores in Valdosta to put salsa on the shelf. They said nobody would buy it — Mexican food wasn’t something that people in Georgia knew about back then — and he talked this one store into putting out a row of it as long as he promised he’d buy the whole crate if nobody else bought any. Then he told all of us who were taking his classes... he’d gotten us all hooked on chips and salsa by then... he told us to go in and buy some so they’d see there would be a demand for it, you know? So when he goes there, he says to the guy, ‘Hey, I thought you were going to put out some of that salsa!’ and the grocery guy says, ‘I did’, and he goes over there and they’re all gone. By the end of the summer, they were keeping four rows of the stuff.”

“Oh yeah, that totally sounds like him.”

“Your parents are good people. They have their own quirky way of doing things, for sure, but they were always kind to us.”

“They *are* good people”, I agree. “I think parenting is complicated, and I don’t always get to see them at their best. I inherited the quirky, like I said in the car”, I say, making eye contact with Reggie, “and maybe some of that is more than they ever bargained for, but they’ve always been on my side, at least as far as they could figure where my side was.”

Melinda says, “It’s good that you can see that it’s difficult on their end. Kids can miss that sometimes, a *lot* of the time, and don’t have much patience for when parents are struggling with



how to do what's best."

"My dad loves me very much, but he just can't let go of the steering wheel. He does it with Jan, too. I don't think he's trying to control us on purpose. I don't think he even knows he's doing it. The problem is...he's always thought farther ahead, on a curve of events he can forecast, than we have. Plans we could make, things we could consider. I think he sees it as making sure we see all that stuff so we can make choices, but, you know, framing someone's options is a form of control. Now with my mom, it's different. She *wants* us to be in charge of our lives. But she doesn't see any reason why it should be at all complicated. So she gets impatient when things don't work out. She was pushed, so pushing is loving. Be who you need to be, figure it out, do it and quit whining. I end up with her telling me to grow up and him wanting to look over my shoulder and take care of me and micromanage, and we all get very frustrated sometimes."

Reggie comments, "It's so easy to look at how your parents do things and tell yourself 'I am never going to make that mistake', and then you have kids of your own and go, 'Oh, now I get it'."

I nod. Rest my chin in the palm of my hand. "One thing I eventually realized is how my dad, by being so opinionated and so emphatic about his opinions, shoved me in the direction of having to set my own priorities. By him emphasizing *everything* that he thinks about *anything*, he ends up emphasizing nothing. I'm exaggerating a little, but seriously, he *is!*", I say, doing my own emphasizing with chops of my hands. "It's like he'll say, 'The Ormandy recording of *Lohengrin* is absolutely the best performance of Wagner ever recorded' and he'll make it sound

just as important and serious as ‘A good person makes every effort to keep any promises they have made’ or ‘Freedom is worth dying for’, ...every opinion of his gets equal weight.”

I pause for a moment. Neither Reggie nor Melinda says anything, although Melinda looks like she might be formulating something to say.

I continue, “When I was little he always swooped in and took care of me, defending me against the school people and also saying in various ways that you can’t be excellent but also not be any different, or else excellent doesn’t mean anything. It’s not that I don’t feel cared about and loved, I do. But I have to figure things out for myself now.”

I get nods on that one.

Melinda pours me a refill of iced tea. She asks, “How is it... at the place where you’re staying?”

“Elk Meadow, glorious Elk Meadow. Definitely a mixed bag on that one. I think I could get something out of it, from some parts of it. Maybe I already have. But there’s also a lot of ...intrusion, a sort of invasiveness. I don’t like being pushed around, I’m here to work on myself, not to be reworked by someone else, and I’ve told them so. And instead of backing off, they get even pushier, and it’s gotten to the point that I don’t feel safe. I don’t trust them.”

Melinda blinks. There’s a momentary pause. “Are you...you haven’t left the program, or decided to leave...?”

“Good question.” I sigh. “One of the problems is that it isn’t just my own fear. It’s how they run the place, so everyone learns to be cautious about getting crossways with them so it

won't look like they don't want to make progress, and that kind of permeates everything, you know? Everyone trying to avoid being called out for holding a viewpoint that isn't approved of."

I get up to use the toilet, and when I return, Melinda is holding the telephone receiver and tells me, apologetically, that my parents are on the line. It's all there on her face: *Sorry, but I had to, you're probably not supposed to be out and you said you weren't sure you'd go back in.* I accept the phone from her.

"Derek? Well, I was wondering how you were doing", my mom begins. "I'm a little surprised to hear that you're over at the Harrisons. Is everything okay?"

"Yes. I stepped out for some time to myself and then I felt like having a conversation with someone who isn't a part of my Elk Meadow world."

"We're proud of you for doing this. I think it takes a lot of courage and I know it must not be easy. What time do you need to be back?"

"They'd be annoyed if I weren't inside by midnight, I suspect."

"So you're on some kind of leave and it's okay with them that you're out roaming around?"

"I assume so. Nobody ever told me otherwise."

"But you *are* going back after you finish visiting the Harrisons?"

"I'm evaluating the situation. It's easier to weigh everything when I'm not feeling trapped. And that's the problem, that's how it feels. Trapped and not safe. Officially, I can leave the program any time I decide it isn't for me, but that's kind of a permanent move and I'm not sure it's the right one."

“It’s not. I know it’s not. We asked around everywhere and read as much information as we could, and if you can’t get the help you need at Elk Meadow, you’re probably not going to find it any better anywhere else. It may not be...*pleasant*, always, but like you said, you really aren’t trapped, so keep reminding yourself of that and stick with it.”

“There’s a good chance I will. I’m catching my breath. Time out.”

I hear my mother’s voice indistinctly. The end of it sounds like “...you talk to him.”

“Hello son”, comes my dad’s voice. “You’ll recall we had this conversation when we first proposed this to you. That you wouldn’t decide right away that it’s not working for you and bail out on it. You gave me your word, and I’m going to hold you to it.”

“This isn’t quite ‘right away’, but I’m leaning towards going back to the place. I never specifically planned not to. I just needed some fresh air and some space to think. I saw an open door and it seemed like a good idea.”

“You know, not everything that you feel an impulse to do is necessarily a good idea.”

“Well, dropping in on the Harrisons probably was, and I think I’d like to get back to socializing, if you don’t mind.” I hand the phone back to Melinda, who passes it on to Reggie.

I tip an *it’s okay* nod towards Melinda, who is still looking apologetic. And it *is* okay, I can’t blame her; in fact I’d put her and Reggie in the awkward middle.

It’s interesting how it’s perceived. Rehab. A place where it’s for your own good but you aren’t expected to realize that. A place people often bail out from, but it’s always unfortunate if they do. I never agreed to check myself in to a substance abuse rehab program, it was billed to me as multi-functional therapy and it was the other stuff on the menu that appealed to me as

relevant; but that's how everyone thinks of it, and it shades how the whole process is viewed. Including my little impromptu AWOL afternoon.

In the background, Reggie exchanges four or five quiet sentences with my dad and hangs up the phone.

It's awkward for a couple of moments, but I ask what it's like working within the aerospace industry and how they like living in Texas and how the university here compares to Valdosta State. We're regaining our rhythm when the phone rings, and when Reggie answers it turns out to be Dr. Barnes and he's asking to speak to me.

"I want you to know", he tells me, "I care deeply about each individual's progress within the program, and to be frank, your situation has thwarted me. Clearly, we aren't reaching you. In my frustration, I've behaved in an unprofessional manner, and my reactions lately have not been appropriate. Which is something that has been pointed out to me by my colleagues. So I want to apologize for that.

"Your counselor, Mark, has explained to me in some detail how important it is for you to work on communications skills. He says we have myopically focused on issues you regard as tangential, and I want to apologize for that, too."

I definitely wasn't expecting this. An apologetic Dr. Barnes. A Dr. Barnes who has some self-awareness of his behavior and even listens to his colleagues. Maybe I pegged him wrong.

He continues, "What do you think would help facilitate you being able to work on your communications issues?"

“Psychodrama has been very helpful. I want to explore more... the patterns of how I interact, getting feedback from the others in the group, I think that’s been the most... it’s been relevant and it’s really affected me, I really feel touched by it. It’s been the gemstone surrounded by, umm, ...stuff that’s mostly gotten on my nerves. Mark is right, a lot of what I’ve been assigned to hasn’t been relevant to me.”

“Then that gives us something to move forward with! Will you come back and give us a chance? I want to prove to you that this can be a positive experience, a chance to make changes in your life and move forward!”

“To be honest, I left on a whim because I found an open door, but it also felt right because I wanted to remind everyone that I’m here of my own volition. I have the right to change my mind any time I think it’s appropriate. Elk Meadow has been pushing us around without our consent and I don’t see why I should put up with that. It’s done gentle, like you’re concerned for our delicate welfare, but you’re still constantly defining our experiences. My participation in my own therapy is a choice on my part, and your facility may or may not be therapeutic for me, and I get to evaluate that. It’s never felt like that was being acknowledged.”

“That’s right, you do have a choice. Even the people who agreed to be here in lieu of being sentenced can decide they’d rather face the other consequences. We would prefer that whenever you decide to leave, you don’t do it the way you did this afternoon. We have insurance issues, where we’re accountable for what happens to you if you haven’t formally checked out.”

“Well... I didn’t break out in order to leave the program. I just wanted to be out for a little while. Everyone’s been asking me if I was willing to go back. I said at the beginning that I’d

give Elk Meadow a try, and since I haven't decided that that's over, I think it's worth upping the ante and asking for a new hand. Deal the cards and let's see what goes down next."

I was entirely willing to pay for a cab but Dr. Barnes insists that a courier come to pick me up and bring me back, so I give him the Harrison's address.

\* \* \*

My reentry to Elk Meadow is as impersonal and intrusive as the initial entry was. I'd been expecting welcome and/or admonitions from the people I know from everyday contact — I was particularly anticipating what Emily, Joe, April, and Jake would each want to say to me— but first there's a lot of perfunctory interaction with the business office staff asking me questions from a printed list. Except this time I am more aware that they *are* working from a list. It's not that they are clinically detached uncaring people, it's that these aren't their questions to begin with, they're questions they've been instructed to ask; and nobody cares about my hypothetical answers to any follow-up questions that these mere *office staff* people might ask, nor about *their* opinions about any of our answers. So, no, they don't ask follow-up questions.

Well, it may be an unintended effect, but it means that the patient experiences it as very dehumanizing and offputting. The people making all these personal inquiries are impatient about getting down your answers and moving on. They're asking you all these questions but no answer you can give them is ever interesting, they just go on to the next question; and you can't explain yourself, you've been prejudged. It feels like a courtroom drama where the prosecutor

isn't trying to understand what you did and why, the prosecutor is trying to make you give answers that will make you look bad. Oh, and yeah, incidentally, it does occur to me that the dehumanizing and offputting aspect may not be an unintended effect.

I have to pee in a cup. No surprise there. I'm waved towards a small bathroom in the back of the nurse's station. I hand them back the urine specimen. They also want to take a blood sample. A bit less of a lack of surprise there. But fine. I don't care. I extend my arm.

Back into the institution. Barnes promises it will be different. I didn't promise *I'd* be different. So why don't I feel more in control of the situation than I actually do at the moment?

\* \* \*

I finally get passed onto my wing, my unit. Emily, being Unit Leader, is in charge and has every opportunity to berate me, but she doesn't. I think about this for awhile and then I realize she hasn't tended to be critical of me in front of other people when the senior staff isn't around to see. Willfully obedient, or just really adept at wearing a mask? "We're so glad you're back", she says.

I see Jake and April. Now I see them as a pair. It was probably right there in front of me before and I wasn't parsing it. I do feel a mild resentment. There's a space in my head for 'Why not April and Derek'. I don't mean we were destined to be and now I'm deprived, more like 'why isn't it *ever* me'. April is somewhat atypical. She has characteristics and expressions that a



person might tag as more like the boys than the girls, and she kind of pushes that out there.

Therefore somewhat like me on the other side of the divide. And too often when I notice someone like that, especially someone broadcasting it as a definition of who they are, it turns out she's only attracted to female people, so then when that's not the case, it's annoying that it's often *still* not me, or at least someone like me, that's she's inclined to latch onto. Well, not their fault, April and Jake, either of them. I nod to them both. I also wave to Ronald, Noelle, and Valerie, who motion for me to join them.

Ronald is apparently addressing Noelle: "...thing you gotta realize is that men are always in competition about this shit, it's that old caveman inside us, spread your seed, make as many babies as you can, but then we get all jealous and shit if our women are being all loose and easy with other men."

Noelle shakes her head, her short brown bangs flying. "That's uncool, you don't get to have one rule for the girls and different rules for the guys. He was fucking around and I caught him at it, that's all there is to it!"

Valerie nods, adding, "Besides, it doesn't make sense, I mean, let's say you're a caveman and you're screwing cave chicks left and right, and the other guys in your tribe are too...you don't know which kids are yours, none of you do, and why the fuck would you care?"

"I don't think it has anything to do with kids", Noelle says, "it's selfishness. People want to cheat but they don't wanna be cheated on."

"I think it's kind of silly to care about that", I say. "If you care about someone and they care about you, why should it bother you if they have sex with someone else? I think the 60s flower

children had it right, jealousy isn't about love, it's about being uptight and controlling!"

"That's not realistic", Noelle replies. "It feels like a gut punch, a betrayal, after you've trusted someone like that and then they go and do this shit behind your back."

"Yeah, I get that", Ronald says. "I'm not saying it isn't a fucked-up thing to do, because it is. Just because guys act like that a lot of the time don't mean it's all right."

I shake my head. "It's only cheating if you make a *promise* that you won't be sexual with anyone else. It's a stupid promise that people shouldn't make, because it tries to make love safe, but everyone ends up worrying there'll be cheating, so love still isn't safe, and then we resent being restricted and confined by the promise. I see all these people going around, like..."

I switch to a cartoon voice, "'Oh, Love of my Life, because I love you so much, I insist that if you find yourself wanting to have sex with someone else, you won't'..."", then, dropping back to my regular voice, "that's not an expression of love, that's a demand for a sacrifice!"

Noelle scowls at me. "I don't appreciate being called stupid, and you acting all superior like you're above all this jealousy, I mean, can you hear yourself?"

Valerie adds, "Yeah, you *do* act like 'this is just the way it is', passing judgment and shit on other people, I guess you can dish it out better than you can take it."

"Truth, bro", Ronald says, pronouncing from that horse-face of his.

I feel my face flush hot. "I'm sorry, I apologize. I didn't think about how that would come across. Jealousy doesn't make sense to me, but I didn't mean it to sound like I'm right and y'all are stupid not to agree."

The ‘April and Jake’ thing prompts me to think about Marjorie for the first time in months. Marjorie Turpin. Nurses’ training school, another LPN student from my class. A class of about thirty-five students, me being one of only three males. A fairly warm crowd, overall. Women being themselves, in a way that you mostly only see when they vastly outnumber the male folks to the point that they don’t consider our presence very much. Teasing and banter and joking around. Our teachers, too. Ms. MacDonald and Ms. Jackson, professional and efficient but clever and amusing, down to earth, guiding the new crop of caregivers. It was a good place to be.

I fit in. I had fun there. I joined in with the teasing and joking and cleverness as well as soaking up the biomedical science and the technique of making a bed with military tautness or giving an injection. Marjorie Turpin was fun too. I liked her. I don’t know when the name teasing got started... maybe when Ms. MacDonald spoke of the obsolete cough syrup called terpen hydrate. But then there was the TURP surgical procedure (trans-urethral repair of the prostate). Or how to interpolate from a series of vital sign measurements. Anyway, at some point I was sitting next to her and glanced at her exactly when I heard the syllable “turp”, and we kind of dissolved and giggled. And after that, in one form or another, the syllable “turp” kept cropping up in our lessons and each time it did I’d make eye contact with her and pretend like it was named in her honor, and more giggling.

I liked my classmates and our camaraderie and wished for more time with them, casual time, off-the-clock time to just hang out and get closer. One day I asked a cluster of them if any

wanted to go out for dinner together after Friday afternoon class finished and got a series of declines and excuses. I asked a few others separately. Reena said not this week but some other time. And Cynthia had to get back to the kids. Marjorie, however, said sure, and we agreed where we'd meet up.

I was standing out in front of the Pizza Hut we'd settled on, waiting. A friendly-smiling dark-haired fellow came over, asked if I were Derek, and introduced himself: "Hi, I'm Patrick. I'm Marjorie's husband." Oh, okay, cool. I looked around but didn't see anyone else following from the direction he had come.

"Where's Marjorie?"

"Well, she's not coming."

I was confused. Disappointed. I asked if he wanted to order anything. He looked at me oddly then said he had to get back. He had departed by the time I got the parts to click together inside my head.

Well, yes, actually, it was like that, I mean, yes, I found her attractive, I would totally go in that direction with her if that were an option. But honestly, I hadn't been consciously thinking of it that way. It's like I'm one of the girls one minute, then, suddenly, no I'm not.

How do lesbians handle this? Is it a problem for you too, the same way? I mean, where *these* are the people that you like, the *people* you want as your friends, but yeah you're also sometimes attracted to them... and you want *that* to happen too, some of the time? What if you don't start off making a distinction? Just respond open and warm and let things develop however they develop? Because that's what seems to come natural to me.

Then there's the militant heterosexual sissy attitude: *It is not my responsibility to make things go in a sex direction just because I'm the male.*

The Marjorie event wasn't unusual for not resulting in me ending up with her as my girlfriend, or affair partner. What was unusual was her picking up on the presence of that kind of interest on my part. I'm really bad at it.

So it's another part of the communication problem. I want to broadcast to the world that there *are* people like me. Femme people, male people, sissy heterosexual male people, and we have these natures and these interests. Then I want to be sufficiently readable that people can pick up on me being open to possibilities, or specifically interested in them personally for that matter, without me behaving in some pushy intrusive way. Without me pretending to be someone I am not, donning manly courting and flirting behaviors. Behavioral drag.

Of course I'd apparently been intrusive, maybe even downright creepy, from Marjorie's vantage point. Hadn't intended to be. I don't tend to censor my flirtatiousness in situations where it might be inappropriate because for the most part nobody notices. I mean, I never properly learned to. I'm pretty unfiltered.

It's all rather complicated. I long ago (well, two years ago) reached the point of being unapologetic and proud of who I was, my identity, and to talk *at* people about it, to come out, to insist on myself as a valid self and a valid sexuality. Flouncy Derek. What I really really want, though, is a chance to talk *with* people about it all, and finish sorting everything out.

= July 25, 1982 (Day Seven) =

A less apologetic Dr. Barnes shows up at our unit's morning meeting. "Derek, it is good to see your face here among us this morning. Derek has come to some important conclusions about us here at Elk Meadow, has decided he's in the right place after all. I think we've all seen how someone can come to recognize important truths that may not have been apparent to them when they first arrived. So let's all go forward with a fresh start attitude."

*I guess that's better than being sneered at in derision or being informed that I'm intellectualizing.*

"Our Mark Raybourne tells me that you don't care if other people don't see you as a real man", Barnes continues. "That's actually a healthy attitude." He glances around the room, gathering everyone's focused attention.

Lowers his voice. It's still resonant.

"For all of us, sooner or later we have to look into the mirror and deal with the person whose opinions matter: *ourselves*! And I think Derek here has been trying to tell us that — that it's not *your* opinion of him that counts, and it's not *mine*, or the opinion of *anyone* here at Elk Meadow that counts..."

Barnes crouches down slightly, resting his hands on his knees, narrowing the focus back to me, conjuring with his posture. "A real man has to live up to his own standards. He has to put down the excuses and the avoidance strategies and face up to his mistakes and his errors of judgment, and examine any patterns of self-destruction he might be stuck in. A real man can't be satisfied with being less than what he can be, what he was born to be, and you're right, Derek,

it's his own opinion of himself that a man has to live with."

Barnes straightens up and opens his hands, palms upward. Benign kind fatherly face in place, waiting.

"I agree with you", I tell him, "about being honest with yourself and living up to your own standards. But what I was talking with Mark about the other day is that I'm not into all that 'be a man' stuff, the standards I have for myself aren't centered around masculinity. I do have standards and goals for myself, and sometimes I don't meet them and have to work on myself or, you know, try to deal somehow with my faults and defenses, but I don't aspire to a lot of the things that were pushed at me all my life in the name of proving I'm a man, and frankly I'm tired of that stuff. And I do get to talk back about it."

"Well now, one thing I think you should examine, since you're being honest with yourself as much as possible, is whether you're using that as an excuse..."

Barnes steps back slightly and holds up one open palm, a stop sign. I don't *think* I was reacting visibly, but it's possible that I did and don't realize it.

"I'm not saying you're making them your excuse", Barnes repeats, "but what if you're using that as a way to set your aspirations in a fashion that doesn't leave you open to failure? Just consider that. I mean, anyone could redefine their failures and disappointments as their goals. *Hey look*, everybody, I always *wanted* to be an unemployed homeless guy with a drug habit, I'm a rolling stone, I'm a tumbleweed and I'm free, never wanted to pay income tax and live behind a picket fence. See how that works?"

"Well, I don't think I conjured this attitude up to excuse what some people regard as my

failures. I was a university student a couple years ago and doing fine in all my courses, but I was also keeping a scrapbook in my dorm room, I wrote ‘Militant Heterosexual Sissy’ on the first page, and the more I took those ideas seriously, the happier I felt about myself. I was never like the other boys and I never wanted to be. It’s not that I didn’t think I was as good as other boys. When I was a kid, I always used to think I was better than them. The girls were definitely better than them, and me joining: *I’m with the girls, and we’re better*. I’m a sissy, just like some girls are tomboys. And I always have been, and it’s not a problem. But to your other point, yes, I think I have other things to work on, ways in which I don’t measure up to what I want of myself, and that’s why I’m here”.

“Well, I suggest you...let’s see, how did you put it the other day? Treat that as your *premise* but consider the possibility that I might be on to something here. That’s all I’m asking.”

\* \* \*

So Barnes wants to talk about gender identity.

I do want to have this conversation that he’s pushing, but I’m still struggling to put it all into words that express all of what I want to say. And I’d really prefer not to have this conversation adversarially.

I didn’t go through my elementary and high school years thinking that the lack of acceptance



and the mean-spirited hostility were all due to me being more like one of the girls than a boy is supposed to be. It looks that way to me now, but that's a retroactive interpretation.

It's a theory; it seems to make sense of my life, and it fits the facts as I know or remember them, but my mind saying it fits the facts, that's also an interpretation, isn't it?

Under the right circumstances, I could talk about this with people, including the possibility that I've latched onto this theory because it lets me *feel* like I'm making sense of things, but that it isn't necessarily factually right, the real explanation. And including the possibility that I've latched onto it because it absolves me of being some kind of horrid unlikeable selfish disgusting person whose hideous personality and atrocious social skills are the real reason almost nobody liked me when I was growing up, and everyone picked on me and called me names and so on.

Under the right circumstances, I could talk about all that, but it seems unlikely to happen in here. Which is quite sad.

But everyone in this place who pokes into other people's motivations and rationales for things is in the habit of making their pokes as if from a position of absolute certainty. Telling the other that this is how it is and if you don't agree you're in denial.

So that provokes my own protective sense that my uncertainty is more of a technicality than a worried fearful state of not knowing. Because it *does* seem to fit the facts and explain things, it's the model of reality from which I operate, and I have as much confidence in mine as you folks have in yours, dammit, and I probably have better reason for the confidence.

Back before I had this understanding of myself, I was a long way from confident. And it showed, and that combination of being different and uncertain really set me up for a lot of

hostility and ridicule. Now I have this clear vision, this explanation, and I come across as quite confident, perhaps pushing into outright arrogance. Arrogance would be worrisome, I mean if I became unwilling to consider any possibility that I might be wrong or that I needed to examine my behavior or my beliefs. I don't want that to happen. When you stop questioning what you believe, you stop learning things.

But, anyway, sure, I get defensive. I'm pretty sure I can lay that defensiveness down. I can be open to questioning it all. Or I could be.

But in this place, that feels too much like it would be unilateral disarmament or something.

\* \* \*

I am meandering down the hall with the notion of seeing who else is hanging out in the cafeteria area. Chirpy redheaded staffer Irma is coming my direction and calls out, "Hey...you, hold on a minute." So I do.

"I know you think you're a fucking smartass. You ever think for one moment that maybe we got something good here and you're messing it up? I seen lots of people get their shit together in here, and I don't know what your thing is, but you're ruining things up for everybody. You ever think of that?" She's authoritatively crisp and a bit scary, glowering at me in revulsion. The inside out of her gameshow-host morning-meeting persona, but she's still an effective people pusher. Her mouth twitches. Scowling, waiting for a reaction.

“You really believe in this place, huh?” I shuffle backwards and to the side and lean against the wall, but I look directly back at her. “I see both good and bad here, Irma, but very few things can be good and also be coercive. Especially if it advertises itself as voluntary. You can’t help people against their will, you know.”

Irma glares at me. “A lot of people don’t know what’s good for them.”

I glare back. “And you think you do? What if we don’t agree?”

She mimics throwing up, while impaling me with her eyes, and then continues down the hall.

\* \* \*

Jeremy signals the sense of a question mark, turning those big hands palms upward and then outward. “So what do you think is causing this, this difficulty in communicating? You make the effort. And you don't think people are deliberately tuning you out.” He's expressive with his long gangly arms; definitely a good communicator himself.

“I don't know”, I reply, “that's part of the frustration. Dr. Barnes and some of the counselors are always telling me I'm intellectualizing. But they do it too, I mean concepts like alcoholism and being in denial, those are all intellectual concepts, it's just that people are already familiar with them. Whoever explained those concepts for the first time had to lay out what they meant by those terms, they're abstractions. Well, when I try to do that, it's really difficult to get people to listen long enough to see if I'm making sense.”

“I've got an idea”, Marie tells me. “Let’s set up a scenario...”

Jeremy and Marie script a new drama setup, assigning Noelle to play me and a handful of others to represent the people I try to speak to. Marie whispers to Noelle, and the two confer conspiratorially, glancing over at me, scheming, Marie's sandy-honey hair bobbing next to Noelle's short brown cropped head.

Meanwhile, Jeremy gives instructions to Joe and Jake and Valerie: "Joe, you start off complaining... I know, complain that your children won't do their chores around the house. You other folks try to give him advice. Then Noelle, as Derek, will have something to say."

Lights, camera, action. Marie wields the VHS recorder.

"These kids", Joe states, "I love them but they're driving me nuts! They won't lift a hand around the place, they're lazy and irresponsible!"

"Well, are they getting an allowance?", Jake asks. "Cut them off until they pitch in!"

Valerie suggests, "Have you sat down with them and tried to talk with them about it when you aren't mad at them?"

"I talk, but it goes in one ear and out the other!", Joe replies.

"I have some important wisdom to offer you", states Noelle-as-Derek. "Children and chores both appear in front of us but we can't project the synthesis. Illusions can create that for us in our thoughts, and we invent theories but never analyze the intellectuals because we're too busy in concrete. There are concepts! Chores have meaning. But only on Fridays! Do you understand why? Have you considered the cognitive? You can be a discrepancy!"

Joe, Valerie, and Jake look at each other in cartoon confusion, putting on bewildered faces

and shrugging. Then Valerie shakes her head and turns her back to Noelle-Derek and continues what she was previously saying to Joe, “Maybe if you made a chore list and posted it on the wall.”

I feel a strong hot flash of anger. I’ve opened myself up to these people! I get mocked and ridiculed often enough without it coming from people I’ve let in. And I most certainly do *not* go around pretending I have something to say just to spout incoherent word soup at people! Then, amazingly, I find myself giggling. Yes, that’s exactly how people act, like I’d just said something that made no sense at all!

“That was beautiful”, Jake pronounces. “She’s got you nailed.”

“Derek”, Jeremy says, “I’d like you to reflect back what you’re feeling after watching that.”

“Well...”, I begin, “I do have an ego stake in thinking I have something important to say. One thing that’s a bit of a hot button for me, I guess, is when people think I’m just trying to sound smart and impress people. Like that poster that people used to have, ‘If you can’t dazzle them with brilliance, baffle them with bullshit’. I’m not playing that game, I’m not doing this to look smart. Promise. I don’t speak up unless I think I actually have something to say. But I admit that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t like to be regarded as smart. Or, wise, even better.”

“That may be”, Valerie says, “but sometimes you say stuff that sounds like what Noelle just said. You ever stop to think it might make other people feel dumb? It’s like ‘What’d he just say? Did you get that? No, me either, I guess we’re too *stooooo*pid to understand him’. So maybe it feels like that’s something you do on purpose. Even if it’s not.”

“Yeah, man”, Jake agrees, “we got one of them there *ego stakes* in this too, you know”, he

says, making quotation marks with his fingers. “You could maybe work on saying what you want to say without using the most college level words you can come up with.”

“Well, I don’t do that on purpose either. A lot of time I’m trying to be precise. Words and phrases that don’t get used by people as often can sometimes be very exact in what they mean. Everyday words get stretched to mean a wider range of things, because they get so much use. And they also, a lot of the time, they take on additional implications, a sort of package deal, and if you don’t want to include stuff that’s associated, especially if you’re trying to call those assumptions into question, you want a clinically detached kind of word. And I *think* in those words. I don’t have to rummage around in my head for them. To say it in simpler language, *that* would require searching for the right words.”

Noelle nods and says, “Yeah, but if your problem is you’re not getting through to people, maybe that’s what you’ve got to do. Take time to find the right simpler words and bring it down to earth.”

\* \* \*

I end up sitting across from Valerie in the cafeteria after psychodrama lets out. “I’ve noticed something about you”, she tells me. “You don’t get all upset and bent out of shape when somebody tells you something straight to your face that’s not quite what you want to hear. But you act like nobody’s done that very often. Are you like an only child and your friends don’t set you straight and shit?”

“I’ve got a younger sister”, I answer. “But it’s like you said about your own sister the other day, *we* weren’t very close growing up either. When I was a kid, I wanted to be her older brother and I guess I wanted her to look up to me and let me take care of her, but she never wanted that...she probably wouldn’t have put up with it from anyone else if *they’d* been her older sister or brother, either, she was always ‘No, I can do it myself, I don’t need help’, but yeah, anyway, I felt pretty pushed away from early on”.

“That’s kinda unusual, I think it’s more often the younger kid who gets pushed away.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right about that. Anyway, once she was old enough to go to school, she had more friends than I did. I was the brainy one, she was the popular one that people liked. We didn’t really have the kind of relationship where either of us could tell the other one something and not have them wary that this was maybe an attack. I think it’s fair to say we cared about each other but... we didn’t trust each other all that much.”

Valerie nods. “Me and my sister got to be like that. Not so much originally, it was more like we were always trying to outdo each other, but when I was in high school was when things really went sour. She knew the stuff I was doing before anyone else, and she started thinking of me as a fuckup.”

We eat for a while in silence. I think about all those long years in elementary school and junior high and high school.

“I’m tired of always being an outsider”, I say to Valerie. “I think I’m getting better at being with people and not thinking they’re out to get me, but it’s always kind of hovering there, in the

background, that they could be trying to hurt me, because people did, a lot, and maybe that's never going to completely go away."

Valerie tightens her lip and nods slowly. "Trust is hard."

\* \* \*

"Can you push up your sleeve a bit more...", the nurse says to Joe. She's not one of the nurses who were on shift when I came back from the Harrisons, but I think I might have met her on that first long evening when I came in. She has red hair with a tinge of brown in it, a scattering of freckles, and she's small and moves rapidly. I watch as she pumps the blood pressure cuff and records Joe's numbers. It's Sunday. Routine vital signs for our unit. "Okay, that's good", she tells him. "Hey, so how're you doing? I haven't seen you in about a week."

Joe nods and smiles. "I think things are working out pretty good, I guess. They don't always tell me, but I get the feeling."

She jots down some more notes in her chart and Joe stands up; I'm in line behind him, so it will be my turn next.

Joe continues, "You really got to be all in on the program if you wanna get something out of being here, I've always been onboard with that, but lately I've been kind of thinking you can't be going around all worried and wondering about how well you're doing because that's like not believing in the program. I'm really into positivity at the moment. Like sooner or later you gotta



go out that door."

I'm instantly thinking he means the door we found and opened the other night. Joe had been there with me, along with several others, but I was the only one who actually went out.

Then I reinterpret Joe's statement — *Oh, I bet he means he's expecting to be discharged soon and be on his way*. He's been all-in on Elk Meadow since I first met him, total cheerleader for the place, even more than Ronald and Ellen, but yeah, once he's out of here he can't exactly be glancing at them for some kinds of thumbs-up approval.

Gary Stevens comes around the corner, his shoes making a little squeak on the linoleum tiles, and he slips a resident's file into the file rack on the counter. The animated nurse gives me a little nod and gestures to the chair, then glances back over her shoulder at Gary. "You getting off-shift?", she says. "You might want to stay off the Sam Houston, there was some kind of pileup in the outbound lane."

"Yeah, thanks Penny. Long day. Be glad to put my feet up." He heads down the hallway.

Penny the nurse turns to me where I'm now seated. "Welcome back. Umm, don't tell anyone, but I endorse playing hookey now and then. I think I'm due for making a run for it myself!", she adds with a wink and a grin. Co-conspirators, she and me. I guess word has gotten around about my little outing.

She wraps the Prestige Sphygmomanometer (same model of blood pressure cuff we used in Athens hospital) around my upper arm, pulls the outer layer velcro down smoothly to the matching inner section, thumbs the release wheel closed, and pumps with fast squeezes.

"How're you feeling? Any leftover itches and sneezes from being outdoors? You said before that

you've got respiratory allergies, right? That must suck in the summer with the jimson weed everywhere. And you came in from out of state, didn't you?" She shakes her head. "So you're not used to it. That stuff's bad. I get red eyes from it myself."

I'm impressed with how she can be casual and friendly with everyone and so totally efficient taking down these routine measurements and herding everyone through the process without being pushy about it. And she remembers people.

I think I could be good at some of this stuff myself. I realize as I sit there watching her scribble down my results that I'm not entirely ready to let go of the notion that I could be a nurse. Although I couldn't do what she's doing now. I'd have to learn how to recognize people by appearance. But Ms. O'Neil said I had a good rapport with my patients, that they reported that I was kind and listened to them. And I understand the biology and I'm good with words, so I can follow complex intructions and my charting is clear and has good details. As my Dad says, I've got to do *something*. I have to think on this some more.

\* \* \*

Afternoon group therapy. Dr. Barnes begins with the announcement that Joe is ready to transition to the outside world. "Joe was Unit Leader last spring, and he has remained involved in everybody's progress. We had some serious mountains to climb, didn't we, guy? Hey, there were times when you carried a black cloud over your head everywhere you went. Thought you hated us, hated this place, and hated the man in the mirror the most. But I hope you're proud of

what you've accomplished. We're proud of you. C'mon, bring it in!"

Joe steps forward somewhat awkwardly and Barnes embraces him and administers a couple fist-pounds to the back.

Dr. Barnes congratulates some other people who are being advanced to a higher level and comments on various people's progress. In due course he comes to me.

"In Derek's situation, we've seen the arrival of a critical juncture, a sort of climactic moment after several days of tension and buildup. First, there was his stated dismissal of my qualifications, and I think along with that, his disbelief that this community had anything to offer him. A stance that upset me, as you all saw, because I really believe that we do. Then he listened as we made our case for Elk Meadow being worth a gamble, and to his great credit he set aside his cynicism and disbelief and opted for a new beginning. That takes courage, and we should all applaud him for that." I get my applause.

Dr. Barnes continues, "Now, Derek, I want to ask you to consider something. On your door, you have those handmade posters or whatever you call them. I don't think I'm being unfair if I describe those as coming from a position of suspicion and distrust. That doesn't mean you didn't have any legitimate reason to express that, but as you have heard, they have felt to many of the other residents as a hostile attack on them, and a pushing away of the community. If we're truly to start fresh and begin again with each other, perhaps they don't need to remain on your door."

Annoying. I'm not seeing a noticeable shift in the institution's behavior. I get reintroduced as Dr. Barnes' protégé, but immediately I'm asked for concessions. Still, everyone has seen and read what's on my door, so they've accomplished their original goal. At this point keeping them

up is akin to keeping a brand going, and I suppose I can't expect unilateral changes. And I could choose to go first. Dr. Barnes and his staff should know by now that I'm not going to drink any cult leader Kool-Aid no matter what.

I take the materials down from my door before I go to bed that night.

= July 26, 1982 (Day Eight) =

That small animated nurse with the freckles is on the phone with someone who has a loud boomy voice, and I can hear him complaining about something on his bill. Someone must have transferred a call to the wrong line. I make eye contact with her and find myself smiling. *God she's cute. Patricia?* She rolls her eyes and holds the phone farther from her ear. "Sir, that's not my jurisdiction. You need to call back...."

I give her a nod and attempt a wry and sophisticated smile.

In a chromium rack on the counter, manila folders stand up with plastic tabs that have our names on them — Noelle's, mine, Ellen's, Jake's, Ronald's...

The nurse finally manages to get off the phone and says something to her colleague about needing a break. Colleague replies "See you in a bit, Penelope", which gives me her name. *Hey, I was close.* We end up walking together down the hall.

With plastic trays and stainless steel utensils and napkins in hand, we point at hash browns and sausages and the counter person dishes out what we've chosen. "I'm curious about

something”, I mention to her. “When this place was being described to me, one of the things they said would be part of the experience would be an examination of nutrition and vitamins and electrolytes and all that, how the things that we eat affect how our brains work. I was in nursing school before I got here, studying to be an LPN, and I liked the classwork ... anyway, it doesn’t seem like they do any of that here as a class, I mean it’s not on my schedule and I haven’t seen anything like that on anyone else’s.”

“No, I mean we have a dietician who sets guidelines they use in meal planning. But you’re right, there’s no instruction. Did you like nursing?”

“I liked a lot of things about it. I liked being a member of the nursing team, and I liked the patients.”

“Think you’ll go back to it?”

“I *have* been thinking about that...but...I don’t think caring for people on a physical-body level is what I’m best suited for. The biggest problem was feeling like I was invading people’s space and interfering with their autonomy. I had a patient die once while I was at lunch. I took his vitals and gave him his meds, went to lunch, came back and he wasn’t breathing, no pulse. It wasn’t unexpected, congestive heart failure and a DNR order, so it was just a matter of when. Anyway, I asked my nursing instructor ‘What do I do now?’, and she said after I report it to the ward supervisor, if I could clean him up for the family, that would be good. So as I’m giving him a bed bath and rolling him over and arranging, I realize how much easier these things are when the person is dead. Because then I’m not worried that I’m bothering him, you know? Anyway, I think maybe when you feel like it’s inconvenient that the rest of your patients aren’t

all dead, that could be a sign that nursing might not be where you belong.”

\* \* \*

I walk past the piano and down the corridor to the doors to recreation. Sun glares down out of a pale blue sky. Texas hot and dry. Same as it ever was... *yeah thanks, David Byrne.*

Many of the other residents are dressed more sensibly than I am for this heat. George and Ronald are in cutoff jean shorts; Valerie has nylon shorts with piping. All I brought were full-length pants.

”Hey everybody”, Joanne greets. She’s attired in spandex. “Today I want us to take turns running a lap around the track. I’m going to time you, and I want you each to try to do your run as close to exactly three minutes as possible. That’s not all that fast but it can be a challenge if you’re not used to running.”

I feel like moving, I’m restless and I’ve got the urge to walk for hours, which is my favorite way to let the back of my head process stuff and sort things out. Instead, I shuffle and stand and wait my turn with the others.

I’m not the first person to whom Joanne calls out, “You’re going faster than pace. Pull it back a bit”, and I’m also not the last. The speed she’s picked for us is just barely faster than a brisk stride. Awkward, too slow to run, too fast to walk. Maybe it’s useful to exercise this weird gait but it’s unpleasant.

Ronald just ignores Joanne and runs at a much faster speed. “I don’t care, I used to run track, c’mon Joanne, this isn’t fun!” Then Valerie clowns around, running backwards part of the way, finally sprinting to the end. Mutiny.

”Well, I’m going to run around the outside perimeter”, I point.

”Couldn’t you just do jumping jacks or something?”, Joanne suggests. She’s admittedly cute in her stretchy clothes. Male sexuality is annoyingly stupid. I don’t like Joanne. She flattens my ears, I don’t know why. I do like the way she looks.

”I’d rather cover some ground”, I reply, then take off at a lope. Enough other people aren’t following instructions that I don’t figure my own insurrection will matter.

Initially, I run around the outside border of the recreation space, the tennis courts and track and ball field area. After two laps of that, I widen out and run along the inside edge of the fence that encloses the undeveloped area of the hospital property with the trees and underbrush. Things had been cut back to put in the fence, but it meant hopping over dead branches and leaping over boulders, so it was more of a cross-country run.

Joanne yells out to me. As I come around the building side of the rec area, she waits in front and I slow to a stop. “I’d really rather you didn’t get that far away”, she tells me.

\* \* \*

I take my customary seat in Mark’s office. He comes around and briefly clasps my shoulders

in a greeting-hug. I think he's sincere about wanting to be a caring counselor-person. I've thrown a lot at him, honestly. He's still here, trying.

He says, "You got out and then you decided to come back in", stating the somewhat obvious. "What do you think you learned from those events?"

"I really hadn't been planning an escape", I tell him, "and that's actually not how I thought about what I was doing. At the time, I wanted to *be* out of this place, not so much *get* out, although I hadn't definitely decided to go back *in* either. The important thing was that I'm the one who gets to decide how I'm going to spend my time. Even when I'm showing up for all the things that are on my schedule, that's me deciding to go along with that, and I don't have to. Speaking of which, by the way, I still have AA and NA on my schedule, and as I've told you, I don't think they're relevant to me and I'd like them taken off. I get that not being an alcoholic or a drug abuser doesn't mean I don't need help to come to terms with how I'm living my life, but if I accept that, I'm still not a drug addict or an alcoholic."

"I see your point, but the twelve step programs aren't on your schedule because you have a drug or alcohol problem, that may be what they're mostly focused on, but you can probably get something out of them anyway, and apply them to your own situation. Everyone here is signed up for AA and NA. I can ask, and see what your treatment team thinks, but we don't want to start a mad rush for everyone dropping sessions that they probably need, so I can't make you any promises. Meanwhile, please keep attending."

I look back at him, noncommittal.

"I've noticed", Mark comments, "that you take a certain pride in being immune to other



people's opinions. What I want you to think about, is that it may not be all positive, this not caring what other people think. You're going to find it hard to bridge gaps and connect with people if you don't give a shit about how they feel."

I *am* thinking about that pretty extensively these days, but it's not a simple situation that reconciles easily. I think Mark Raybourne would like to establish it like some kind of 'wake up and smell the coffee' maxim, some profound and single-sided truth, the kind of insight you embroider into a sampler and frame for your wall. 'You can't get close to people and push them away at the same time' or something like that.

The example situation that my mind keeps harkening back to is fall of '79, University of New Mexico, the semester just before I came out. Unlike a lot of other places and times prior to that, where I'd been harassed and attacked, ridiculed for being femme and called queer and faggot and all that, the UNM students had mostly been pretty non-judgmental and accepting. Several of them came right up to me and told me so. They'd say things like, "If you can accept yourself, you'll find that other people are ready to accept you as you are." The central problem was that most of them perceived me as a shy gay guy who was uptight and in denial about it and still in the closet, but freaking out. That's the pattern they had some familiarity with, it was the phenomenon they knew about.

I didn't have a handle on my difference yet myself, I just knew their tolerant reaction made me really uncomfortable. That particular acceptance wasn't letting me be myself, it was pushing me into something. Or towards something. That sounds homophobic, doesn't it? But it wasn't

gay male people who were doing the pushing here. Think about that. I was being pushed towards thinking of myself as gay or else embracing straight + masculine.

By the time spring rolled around, everything was different; I was cheerfully telling people “I’m actually not a gay guy, I’m a sissy, like the opposite of a tomboy. I’m effectively one of the girls except I happen to be male. It’s similar in some ways to being gay, but also different.” But I couldn’t have told them that in the fall. Things hadn’t clicked into place for me yet.

So sometimes it *is* necessary for me to tug on people to pull them closer with one hand, while pushing back at them with the other. A type of ‘*yes, but*’ reaction to what they are thinking about me and how they are behaving towards me. I mean, sure, if people are being hostile and judgmental, I don’t need to bother with them and their opinion of me doesn’t matter. I know I don’t deserve that. And I don’t even hate them for it any more, they’re messed up and their heads are full of twisted notions and lots of avoidance of real facts, so their opinions don’t count. At the opposite extreme, if people are taking time to really get me and understand me, I do care and their thoughts do matter. But so much of the time it’s somewhere in between those positions. Not closed off to me but seeing me in skewed ways, filtered through assumptions and attitudes.

\* \* \*

The unstated goal of biofeedback appears to be to get us to doze off. The most obvious and self-explanatory readings are for heart rate, respiration, and muscle tension, and although we

weren't specifically instructed, nobody in the biofeedback lab is ever focusing on making these numbers go *up*. The less clearly defined measures, the galvanic skin whatever-it-is and sweat rate and the various brain wave patterns also have associations with relaxation. Don't sweat it. Alpha waves. Chill out.

I've tried to push the colorful lines around in different configurations to see what it would feel like. What would it be like to have low heartbeat, high respiration, low muscle tension, and sweating like crazy? But I don't really have that kind of granular control. Maybe it will come with practice. Watching the line patterns is kind of calming anyhow. I zone out for awhile, and then my block of time is over.

After lunch, I head down to the piano, where I've invited several of the folks on my unit. I start playing "The Hitchhiker's Song" but my voice isn't warmed up yet and I don't like the way I sound. My throat is too tight, too tense. I apologize and do some vocal warmups then kick off the song again; this time I am driving the phrases comfortably. I'm mostly relaxed but my abdomen is taut, like someone about to pick up heavy suitcases. Supporting the vocals. Belting it. The piece is a narrow-band song, with most of the notes falling within a span of a fifth, although fairly high in my range. There's a middle part that goes higher.

I twist around on the piano bench after letting the last chord die out.

"I like the piano part, the way that intro starts off", John B. tells me. "You start with that high bit, and then each time you repeat it, you put a little more under it." Valerie and Ronald are also nearby, standing against the wall listening, with Jake and April and Ellen at the little table

that George had helped me drag into the space earlier in the week. I've got an actual *audience*.

"You sound good", April tells me, "so don't get me wrong. I couldn't sit there and do what you're doing. But I've known people who could play crazy good. And you could yell out any song, like 'Levon' or 'Bohemian Rhapsody', and they could just play it perfectly with all the riffs and frills and shit. And they aren't famous and making money from it. And you don't quite have those chops. I think this notion you've got that you're gonna support yourself and get your message out into the world by playing the piano and singing your songs, that's wishful thinking."

Valerie points out, "You write some stuff that's pretty good. That piece you wrote about being here in Elk Meadow, that was pretty and powerful. Like the guy singing it, he's got all these strong feelings, all sad and angry. Maybe you could get someone who's already in the business to sing your songs and play them."

Whenever I listen to musicians who've successfully made it, it seems like there's a wide range of talent out there. Some people who could do damn near anything, like April described, but some others who just had a particular sound that nobody else was making. I wasn't convinced I couldn't somehow catch on and get popularized, under the right circumstances. But like the rest of the whole communicate-with-society thing, I don't know any secret tricks for making that happen.

While I've been in internal reverie, thinking about my prospects as a musician, Jake has been speaking to Ellen. I start to pay more attention. "It gets messy when it's your family", he tells her. "You start out trying to divide the world into the ones who are really on your side and the

ones who are dragging you down, but then there's family."

April adds, "You got to believe in yourself. They can either line up behind that or they can get out of the way."

I scooch to the end of the piano bench closest to where they are sitting. No one shrinks away, including Ellen, so I guess I'm not unwelcome.

Later, I contribute, "I have to agree with Jake. It's complicated when family is involved. That makes it a lot of wear and tear, and I'm sorry you have to deal with that right now. Is this mostly about the vacation stuff?"

Ellen nods.

April gives her a brief hug. "You got to believe in yourself. You are tougher than you think. Tougher than *they* think."

"Yeah", I chime in again. "You've been through so much, and that makes you a survivor. You're tough. You don't take shit from me, so you shouldn't take shit from anyone else either. You get to decide."

Jake hugs Ellen from the other side.

I find myself wishing I knew more of the backstory about what was going on. But it does seem like Ellen has been profoundly isolated somehow. I remember a John MacDonald book where the main character has a soft spot for characters he designates as wounded birds. There could be sexist things about wanting to be a caregiver and rescuer. Getting off on the other person's vulnerability and your own power as gallant knight and all. But at the same time isn't

that also a lot of what comprises the feminine role, the interactive mutual empowerment that comes from taking care of? What does it mean if I'm doing that?

\* \* \*

I show up at Alcoholics Anonymous. I'm not happy to be here, but Mark implored me to attend. Get something out of it. Yeah right.

I listen to the testimonials and the focus on the step of recognizing that a higher power could restore us to sanity.

Ronald says, "I tried everything, you know. I think I knew I needed God in my life, but I wanted God to do lines with me, you know, I wanted God as a drinking buddy. It wasn't until I bottomed out that I reached out and asked God to save me."

Valerie testifies, "I just couldn't cope any more, not on my own. I am not a churchy person, so I don't believe in God, but I reached out to the universe and I just said 'I can't do this alone' and I turned everything over to what I felt was there."

Gary doesn't like me sitting there in sulky silence. "C'mon Derek, let's hear what's going on with you", he prompts. Doing that raspy folksy voice of his.

I sigh. "One thing I've been thinking a lot about in AA is the prayer you always end this thing with. It's all aimed at giving in and giving up. My sense of higher power isn't focused there. I think your Serenity Prayer is upside down. I mean, it should be... 'God, grant me the

wisdom to know the difference between what I can change and what I cannot, and the courage to change what I can, and when all else fails the serenity to accept the things I cannot change'. I want the wisdom and the courage. I think maybe I already have the courage. It's the wisdom. Show me which things I can change. And how. That's what I want. If I know for sure that I can't change something, I think I can accept it, but first I want a chance to change the things that I can."

Gary gives a half-smile. "Cute. But I mean tell us about your higher power."

"Seriously? You mean I get to introduce you to my religious perspective?" I grin. I don't often get discussions to veer towards me so nicely. "My atheist friends like to hassle me about my 'need' for there to be a God. What shortcoming there is within me that needs for there to be a God. The most intensely I ever prayed, I started out with 'God, I don't know if you're out there but if you're not, you ought to be'. I asked some questions and I got answers. Which was kind of startling."

Gary snorts. "Got yourself a hotline to God, huh?"

"Everything is still subject to scrutiny though. I think I'm okay with answers popping into my head as if out of nowhere, but they still have to make sense, you know? I do sometimes use the word 'God' to refer to something that seems real to me. So I'm not an atheist. But God likes to be understood, not just blindly followed."

Valerie chimes in, "That's kind of how it is for me, too. I don't know if it's the same as what other people mean when they talk about God but it works for me."

"Well, Derek, it sounds to me like you want to hedge your bets", Gary says. "You say you

need God in your life but you aren't ready to let go and turn your problems over to him. That's your problem, you know, you think you know better."

I nod. "There may be some truth to that. Learning to trust and letting go of control and all that."

"So why don't you give the Elk Meadow staff a chance to help you? We're right here, all you have to do is relinquish and accept!"

"Well, I did come back to Elk Meadow. That was my choice, *twice* now, and I'm here. And I am participating in the parts of the program that seem useful and helpful. But I don't have Elk Meadow confused with God, Gary. You staff folks have control issues of your own you should be working on."

Gary scowls.

\* \* \*

I'm walking back towards my room when Valerie accosts me. "Hey, sissyboy. Do you play cards?"

"Some. Not poker, and not for money."

"We aren't betting. Just for fun. You know spades?"

"Decently well. I don't know it as good as I know as hearts."



“We need an extra person. We got me, Ronald and Jake, April and Jack.” She motions for me to follow. Cute.

“Hey hey, Derek! Have a sit down!”, Jack says, riffling the card deck. The classic red sketch of a bicycling angel beckons from the top card.

Hands are dealt. Bids are made. Tricks get taken.

After several games have been won and lost, I ask if they’d ever played cutthroat hearts or oh heck. Nobody’s heard of either.

“So tell us about them”, Ronald demands. “How are they different? How do you play?”

“Cutthroat hearts is where you shoot for low score. Every heart you take is a point. Queen of spades is thirteen all by herself. But the Jack of diamonds is minus ten, and you can also run hearts, if you get them *all* you take thirteen points off your total instead of adding a point for each heart.”

Jake says, “I know that one, I’ve played it, we called it ‘Shooting the Moon’. It’s not bad but I like Spades better.”

I nod, shuffle the deck, and deal out the starting cards.

\* \* \*

I sit in my room with pen and paper, scribbling out edits to one of the chapters of *The*

*Amazon's Brother*. Ka-snap. I open the three-ring binder and put back the pages with the new notes. Close it again with a pop.

*The Amazon's Brother* is really my first attempt to describe what it was like being me, growing up, going through puberty and adolescence, and on into early adulthood and finally coming out as...something different. Heterosexual sissy. And radical feminist. The second half of the book is my attempt to write contributions to feminist theory, integrating my experiences with the perspective that feminists understand and believe. They are the visionaries of our time, teachers and heroes, the people who gave me tools and visions; and I want to contribute and belong. I want to be part of a shared identity, to be plural. *For once in my life I want to join something.*

I've had new thoughts and new analyses, prompted by my recent recollections of being at UNM that fall, when I was semi-accepted socially. I've been pondering the resultant questions about having a sense of belongingness and how being accepted can be a two-edged sword if the people who accept you don't understand you. Hence my recent thoughts about needing to pull people closer and push them away at the same time.

I have *The Amazon's Brother* here with me because I'm still working on it, but also because I always want to have it with me. I left a backup copy in my bedroom at my grandparents' house, but I certainly didn't want to leave the only copy of the book behind and risk something happening to it while I'm gone. I want it within reach.

And...did I take it with me the other day when I slipped out the unlocked door? Of course not.

I've thought at times that I might share *The Amazon's Brother* with people here at Elk Meadow. That could still happen. Maybe.

= July 27, 1982 (Day Nine) =

"Turn to your left and high-five your neighbor", Irma tells us. Now turn to your right and do it again! Good morning, community!"

The hands I smack belong to Ronald and Valerie. "Go back to bed, Barbie", Valerie tells Irma, not loudly enough for it to actually carry to her but sufficient for those of us nearby to hear. Jake makes an amused sound.

I'm not exactly sure why, but it *feels* like there's been a subtle shift. It's not quite that Valerie and Jake and Noelle and April have decided I'm bestfriend material, but more like they've inspected me and decided I'm all right. They're more okay with me seeing that they're not entirely in love with Elk Meadow and its programming and staff. I won't use it against them to make a point to Barnes, and at the same time I'm no longer the symbol of opposition around here either. They know I won't mock them for trying to get something out of being here.

I'm more comfortable around them too. They can roll their eyes at Gary Stevens and Dr. Barnes and Mark Raybourne, they aren't creepy indoctrinated cult followers.

So I'm looser around them, a bit sillier. When I'm trying to describe an example of some kind of behavior or attitude, I'm more likely to act out a parody. Any of them may speak critically of me, say something dismissive or even downright contemptuous, but it's at the same

level of caustic familiarity with which they speak to each other, not real hostility. I'm not carefully picking my words as if they might be used against me later.

They still treat me as a nerdy bookish sort but they're less critical of me using obscure words. I'm more inclined to giggle when they say something that hits me as funny, and I catch myself skipping down the hallway towards a cluster of them when I see them outside the cafeteria.

\*       \*       \*

There's someone sitting at the piano stool, which is unusual. It's Emily. She hasn't opened the wooden cover that goes over the keyboard and isn't poised like she's going to play, just sitting there. She sits very still in the piano alcove, leaning slightly forward, arms tight at her side. The overhead light is turned off, so she's in the dim light from the corridor, the green and yellow mural colors on the wall faded to shadowed olive shades.

I approach slowly, walking quietly; when I'm within about four feet of her, I pause and wait for her to become aware of me. I see a slight lift of her head. "Hello", I say.

"Do you want to play the piano? I'll leave...", she says dully.

"What's wrong? If you don't mind me asking...?" I wait quietly. She looks like she might have been crying. Not that she's red-eyed as if she's been bawling for half an hour, just a little smudgy and disheveled around the face.

Emily looks at me from the side for a couple seconds, then shifts on the piano bench to face

me. “I miss my boys. My children. Do you have kids?”

“No.” Which means maybe she won’t want to talk to me about it, whatever it is. I wait again.

Emily sighs. “I just got promoted to Level One. Did you hear? Emily Sanders, that girl’s really pulling it together.” She pauses. “I’ve worked hard in here. I’ve really tried to listen? And do what’s expected, what they want, to show I’m serious about getting my life in order.” She speaks faster, more emphatically. “I’ve been Unit Leader for two months now. I’ve got Mark for individual. He promised me if I made Level One I could get a pass and go home and visit my kids. I’ve done everything they ask. Well, Dr. Barnes overruled Mark. He says I’m treating it like a trade, what he calls tit for tat, and says it doesn’t count if I only do what’s right because I expect a reward from Mark in return.”

“That’s twisted. They should keep their promises.”

Emily scowls. “It’s not like Dr. Barnes didn’t know about it. They all talk with each other, and nobody would tell us anything like that without running it past Dr. Barnes first. They dangled that in front of me just so they could pull it away and say I want special favors for making progress. They set me up.”

“Yeah, I’ve seen that they can be really manipulative. It’s not fair.”

Emily looks at me contemplatively, long and slow. Then she says, “Don’t tell anyone. If they see I’m angry about it they’ll hold it against me. Thanks for listening. Hey, you better go out for recreational, okay? I don’t want to make you late.”

Having been dismissed, however gently, I leave her to the aloneness of her own space and go

out the doors, although it's actually a good ten minutes before I'm due out there.

\* \* \*

Joanne comes around the corner. So far the only other residents are a couple of new admissions I don't know yet — Kim and Javier. We've done mutual intros but otherwise we're just shuffling back and forth waiting.

"Oh...umm... listen, Derek", Joanne fumbles as she gets closer. "I, umm, we... staff had a discussion", she says, trailing off. She's trying to hold on to her confident smile but it's sliding, and her eyes skitter away from my face. "...it's not a good idea for you to be outdoors without sufficient supervision. So I need you to go back inside."

Seriously? They're worried I'm going to scale the fence and run away? Or is it that I might disobey instructions and engage in unapproved forms of exercise?

These people *really* need to synchronize their messaging better. So much for 'Derek has made good progress and has decided he likes it in this place'. I reach out for some low-hanging contempt and stare at Joanne without replying and whirl around and stalk back into the building.

Emily is still over by the piano but Mark and Jeremy are there too, Jeremy sitting next to her on the piano bench and Mark hovering, holding on to the top of the piano.

They're being circumspect about anything specific, but as I walk by, I overhear Jeremy saying, "Just play the game. Put this all behind you", so I figure Emily decided she can trust

them enough to tell them about it.

I feel like I'm getting some privileged insights. Perhaps more people on staff than I realized are less than fully enthusiastic about the things that happen in this place.

I *would* like to play the piano, actually, but I'll come back later; meanwhile may as well hang out in the cafeteria area until psychodrama. I'm still not interacting as much as I should.

Jake and April are over at one of the tables, with an open bag of potato chips in front of them. I wave, get a return wave, and go to sit with them. "What's going down?", Jake greets.

"I've been demoted down to Level Five", I tell him.

"Say what?", April reacts. "Level Four is the lowest level they've got. There *isn't* any Level Five."

"They're not calling it that, but I've got fewer privileges now than when I came in. They don't want me to go outdoors any more."

I recap what Joanne had told me. April and Jake proclaim this to be seriously fucked up.

\*       \*       \*

In psychodrama, Valerie opts for the hot seat and wants to dive into how she gets treated at her doctor's office.

Jeremy puts his palm to his chin for a moment, then suggests, "From what you've been saying, doing your conversations with the nurse at the office desk seems like a good place to start. Noelle, how about you be the desk nurse?"

“And like I said”, Valerie adds, “you know I’m in recovery, you know all about my relapses and all that...”

“Yeah, been there myself”, Noelle grins.

Marie raises the VHS camera and frames the two of them and starts filming.

“Hi, Phyllis”, Valerie says, playing herself, “I was wondering if I could get renewals with extra refills on these prescriptions because I’m going to be away for awhile.”

Noelle braces her arms against an imaginary desk, thumbs through a couple pages of imaginary chart. She bites her lip, glances at Valerie, then shakes her head. “You think this time it’s gonna turn out different, huh?”

“That’s none of your business! Can I just get my meds renewed?”

Noelle rolls her eyes and pantomimes scribbling an entry in the chart.

“How was that?”, Marie asks, glancing up from the movie camera. Valerie says she wants to switch roles and play the desk nurse.

“So, umm, I need these prescriptions refilled”, Noelle begins, “and can I get extra refills for these? I’m out of town for awhile.”

Valerie-as-nurse does a wry one-sided smile, then shakes her head. “It’s hard to believe that somebody with all your advantages would just throw it away. Look how your sister’s doing!”

Noelle puts her hands on her hips and snaps, “Hey, like, invasion of privacy! How about you spare me the lecture, Phyllis, and just do your job.”

After psychodrama is over, I get back to the piano and this time I have the space to myself.



I launch into a sonorous atonal composition I haven't named yet and then shift into "If Only To Wonder" and I like the sounds I'm making. Which is the reason I play. Not to show everyone. Not to be a star. Not to get rich or make a career out of it.

Admittedly, I'd like to amaze everyone and get a huge audience. That would be so cool. And I don't have a way of supporting myself, as my parents are so fond of reminding me, so it would be convenient if I could do this professionally.

But if I'm not good enough or lucky enough for that to happen, I still get to sit here and produce this tapestry of sound, and it makes me feel better. It expresses how I feel on the inside. So part of wanting an audience is about that, wanting to express myself to people.

The piano I crave, the one I wish I could talk my parents into buying for me, is a Yamaha CP-80 electric grand. A portable piano you can take apart and put in a car. Take to places where people are gathering, the way other musicians might bring a guitar with them. But when you get it there, it has real strings and hammers, it's truly a piano, unlike that popular portable keyboard, the Fender-Rhodes, which sounds like doorbell chimes, a round translucent sound that isn't at all like the sound a real piano makes.

I can't buy it for myself. I have no income. It's a frustrating situation, but it's actually unusual that I find myself craving one of the world's expensive toys.

For the most part I don't feel deprived despite being sidelined from the world of money.

It's frustrating being sidelined from having a respected contribution to make, though. God that sounds self-righteous and pretentious, but it's true. I don't like being painted as a failure but

I still worry that maybe I can't just blame everyone else and that's another conversation. All through my school years I figured that when I got to adulthood, I'd be snapped up for the same reasons I got good grades. I mean, I take assignments seriously and I'm smart and I dedicate myself to doing a really good job. Earn the approval strokes, you know? Take some pride at what you can do and contribute and feel good about that too.

That's not how it's worked out, though. I've mostly been yelled at by employers. And fired a lot. It isn't because I'm too stupid to understand the work. Or because I don't try. I don't think I've fallen short of doing what was being asked of me, either. Most of the time, anyway. A couple of times it's been because they assumed I already knew something so they didn't bother to explain. But really, most of it has been unearned anger and criticism. Basically, they don't *like* me. Teachers mostly did. Classmates mostly didn't. And now that I'm an adult, employers mostly don't. Why?

Before my parents asked me to take care of Grandpa, I spent the year out in an oil field town, Rangely Colorado. I'd been told it was a place where, if you were willing to work, there was plenty of work available and a person could make some money. It was initially true, too: itinerant laborers like me occupied a public campground and lived out of tents all summer and fall, and employers would drive in with pickups and ask for any available people willing to do this or that type of work, and we'd hop on and they'd take us to the work site. While it lasted, I worked day jobs and socked away as much as a third of the price of the piano I wanted, that Yamaha CP-80. I worked as a hardbander's assistant, helping him weld lengths of pipe for the drilling operations — for one day, because he didn't want me back. I worked a day as a

roughneck in training, at the actual drill site, getting sprayed with oily water and handing equipment to the operator when requested, but they didn't want me a second day either. I had better luck with the cutting crew, spending my days cutting down scrub pine and cedar with a chain saw or feeding the scraps into the chipper, a machine that turned branches and twigs into sawdust. I worked with them for two and a half weeks before the team boss said he didn't like my attitude and fired me.

When someone says things like that keep on happening wherever they go, we're nearly always justified in thinking the problem is their behavior, because that's all these recurrent situations have in common, right? So I really can't blame people for starting with the assumption that I'm probably lazy or insubordinate or don't follow instructions.

It seems more like employers think that I have too high an opinion of myself. Just like Ellen and Ronald and Dr. Barnes, they don't like me talking like an intellectual. I learned a long time ago to keep my unsolicited opinions to myself, try to keep my head down and just do what's asked of me. But it seems like I have mannerisms, facial expressions, stuff like that, that hit a lot of guys in a way they don't care for.

My parents are college educated and they read all the time and always encouraged me and my sister to put a high value on thinking and understanding and absorbing facts and learning processes. When other kids acted like I was putting on airs, my parents emphasized that to be more intelligent or better educated than others meant being different from them, and therefore different was okay.

So some of it, I think, is a sort of classism. I have upper middle class intellectual

mannerisms and thought processes, and I seem weird and out of place in the kind of environments where I'm qualified to work, given my lack of a college degree. It certainly works in the opposite direction, where someone in a professional setting that requires at least a minimal college degree has a hard time being taken seriously if they don't speak grammatically or they slouch or don't have the right kind of serious attentive facial expressions. And if your family or your culture don't perform the right behaviors, it's not your native language, and you won't automatically pick the right ones up just by getting a professional degree or certification, so it's class snobbery. But that's the direction we usually think of it working, of keeping the aspiring lower classes at a disadvantage any time they poke their head into a setting occupied by people from higher classes. I'm not saying class inequality is just some kind of mutual and equal oil-and-water situation, as if being kept out boardrooms and congressional chambers is equal to being kept off of shop floors and construction crews. But I'm focusing on *how*, not *why*. And for how it works, it's useful to look at how social class makes you a misfit any time you don't stay in your lane.

I think it happens when someone from the upper middle class like my parents find themselves in a situation where they're surrounded by the established wealthy, the genuinely rich. I have a cousin who does volunteer work in the admin office of a charity foundation. She once told me about a time when she followed in the wake of a program administrator while he tried to schmooze potential donors at a charity event, and got the sense that all the wealthy patrons knew each other and had been to the same schools, but the program administrator she was tagging along with wasn't one of them and had a different set of tiny behaviors, gestures,

ways of speaking. He didn't get the big donation he was hoping for.

I wonder what happens when the young adult children of the truly rich try to have an actual profession, on their own and independent of their parents' clout, and all their behavioral habits mark them as trust fund leisure class prep kids. Do they come across as uncaringly lazy and arrogant and incapable, even if they're trying hard, because of their mannerisms?

Class analysis urges us to blame the wealthy folks, as if they're in charge of the unequal social structure. I think maybe as individuals they have no more experience of control than the rest of us. They're defined by the structure too.

A big part of me not fitting in when I'm trying to find and keep a job is me not fitting in specifically with *males*. I didn't notice that originally, or I didn't consider it that way. But the working class world is a lot more sex segregated than the office world that people like my parents inhabit.

Guys always think I'm doing something offensively wrong. Thinking I'm better than them. They do this thing, it's hard to describe, but it's the equivalent of that high-five that Irma has us do at the beginning of morning meetings, and I don't engage with them the right way.

The hardbender seemed offended that I didn't join in with his sex-word-laden metaphors for the parts he was working on. I wasn't bothered by his language, I didn't act all huffy about it or anything like that. But he didn't like me being polite. The roughnecks kept correcting my way of latching the clamp or handing a tool over. I should do it with more of a bang. They wanted me angrier, more emphatic. I wasn't slow, and when I latched or attached something, it was solidly latched or attached. But still I wasn't doing it right; the foreman said I wasn't taking it

*seriously* and could get them all hurt.

Back when I was in fourth grade, some boys in my class informed me that I walk wrong, that I bounce too much, and they took it upon themselves to instruct me. Walk flat and level, like this. And don't walk around smiling, it makes you look stupid. Wear your face like this. Walk around showing that nobody better mess with me, see? It felt like they were partially doing this to get me on board, for my own good, but they were also annoyed with me.

They started calling me 'Skippy' and would prance in an exaggerated way when they saw me in the hallway, mocking me.

Yeah, that was me.

\* \* \*

"This week has seen a number of people in our community buckle down and do the work", Dr. Barnes informs us. "It often isn't easy to take the observations of our colleagues to heart when it means confronting things we're accustomed to avoiding. As President James Garfield once said, 'The truth will set you free, but first it's gonna make you miserable'. So this afternoon, I want to recognize Jake Patterson. Hey, we've watched Jake and his demons. Sometimes he's wrestled with them and sometimes it seems more like he's wrestling *for* them, but let's applaud his courage and perseverance!

"Now, Jake, here are the habits that I think continue to undermine your efforts. You like to establish friendships and then demand your friends' loyalty, by which unfortunately you

sometimes mean ‘Don’t tell me anything I don’t want to hear or you’re not really my friend’. And you use jokes to jolly us along. You like to ‘ha ha’ your way out of situations, and I bet you’ve done that all your life. But Gary tells me you’ve really dug deeper in individual, and you’re an involved member of the group and make contributions, important ones, reaching behind you to help others move forward.”

Dr. Barnes turns to his left. “And Emily. Oh Emily, you work so hard in here, but that temper you still tote around can get you into trouble. We all admire Emily so much, don’t we, she’s a symbol of what can be accomplished. It’s been a long three months, hasn’t it? I think maybe you’re learning to count to ten instead of acting out your frustration. But you still forget sometimes. You also haven’t completely given up on carrying grudges in your knapsack. Scores to settle. Let go, just lay that bag down and leave it behind. You can be that much lighter.”

“Someone’s been going...”, Dr. Barnes suddenly announces. He doesn’t complete his sentence. He holds his right arm in front of him, bent at the elbow, then he flips his hand down from the wrist, and simultaneously shrugs his shoulders and produces a closed-eyed preen. He glances down at his right hand as if checking his fingernails and bends his hand backwards.

Then he loses the smile and flicks an evaluative glance out towards us.

Perhaps towards me. I’ve had that particular limp-wristed gesture performed at me with a certain very specific hostility many times. He isn’t doing the eye-contact thing, though.

I shouldn’t be oversensitive. I should not automatically attribute anything reminiscent of being mocked...

Never mind that, hey good catch over there on the sincere side of the brain, but more to the point there's also no need to register 'direct hit' if he is indeed scoping me out and trying to play with my head.

Three long silent beats go by. The more cynical 'good catch' voice in my head whispers *It's your conversation, Dr. Barnes; say whatever you intend to say*. Nobody in the room has made a sound.

"... and *there she is!*", he finally completes, and sure enough, out among the flock of people in the big group room, a redheaded staff member steps out so everyone can see her, holding her left hand out limply in that same posture and thereby showing off a big engagement ring.

And I'm left unsure of what just happened.

I think it's healthy to be unsure.

Doesn't keep me from having my strong suspicions. If I'm right... that was a pretty deliberate calculated jab, so sophisticated it came with a backup plan in place in case he didn't elicit any reaction.

\* \* \*

As I walk down the hallway towards my room, and past the nurse's station, I see the patient charts standing up in their wire racks. Mine among them. I'm quite curious to know how the staff actually perceive me. That's likely different from what they address to me about myself, and my progress and so forth. So much of what they express, I've come to realize, is very



strategic, a stimulus crafted to obtain a response. For all their emphasis on honesty and the courage to quit hiding things, they aren't doing honesty themselves. They don't share with us what they think and feel about us. They share what they think we need to hear.

I wonder what they've charted about the sissy identity stuff, if anything, and I'd also like to see how they view the patients'-rights power struggle stuff, and fitting in or not, whether they capture any understanding of my viewpoint and how I see myself. Whether they only see me as adversarial and argumentative in some pathological sense or recognize that I have some valid points to make. Whether I make sense to them in any discernible amount. I am a cut-off person, generally speaking; I have more to say to people than I have people to say it to, and I'm not all that good at saying my stuff. That's the attraction of being in a place like this, the prospect of being listened to. But I have a nasty suspicion I would not find much of myself within my charts.

There's understanding, and then there's the putting of that understanding into words, which is its own challenge. Quite apart from that, there's the additional concern about how other people reading it would react. The nurses and therapists would have to take into account how Barnes, for example, would respond to whatever they wrote, assuming there's any real risk of him reading the notes.

I walk over slowly. "Hi"

"Oh, hi, Derek."

“I’d like to read my chart.”

“Well, that’s not allowed. The charts are for the staff to make progress notes, and for your doctor to put his assessment.”

“I know that’s what goes in there. I was a nursing student. I won’t take it personally. I think I can get some good insights from reading and understanding how the professionals perceive me.”

The nurse shakes her head. “Well, you’d have to take that up with your personal counselor, but it would ultimately be up to Dr. Barnes, and I never heard of any patient being allowed to read their chart. That could interfere with their treatment.”

I’ve never seen a nurse in here before with a nameplate. Hers says she is Vicky Armstead, RN. She has honey-colored hair. Serious eyes. Intense and officious, nurse in charge.

I remember Penelope from the other day, the one with whom I’d had the conversation down in the cafeteria and who had practically high-fived me for slipping out of this place. I think I’ll keep an eye out for when she’s on shift, and see if maybe Penelope has a different attitude about me being able to read my own chart.

\* \* \*

I’d really like to go for a long walk and sort out my thoughts and feelings. I guess second to playing the piano, that’s my other main form of regular therapy.

Since Joanne has barred me from recreation until further notice, I don’t guess that’s a

possibility, if it ever was. I stare down the hallways and corridors of Elk Meadow and I get an idea.

The hall I just came from goes all the way down past the group rooms and psychodrama lab and the cafeteria, then it becomes Unit One with their living space branching off. Down that way somewhere is another corridor that goes past an equivalent nurse's station and bathrooms and the doors that lead to the entrance foyer branch off and then you're on Unit Three. If you go past their living space area and take a right, you're coming back this direction except over on the other side of the square, the hallway with the individual offices, Dr. Barnes and Gary Stevens and Mark and various other counselors. Then you're going through Unit Four, more branching hallways, nurses' station, and so on, past the door I went out when I went to visit Reggie and Melinda, the cafeteria from the other side entrance, and another right at the end and you'd be back on this hallway.

Or, rather, I would be. I can walk laps.

I start down the corridor at a brisk stride as if I were outside walking. People glance at me curiously as I go past; it no doubt looks like I'm in a hurry to get somewhere. The eye contact and faces and body language is distracting so I tune them out. Lengthen my stride more. Yeah that feels good. Someone steps out from an adjoining corridor and I effortlessly steer around them, compensating, the same way you would if you were driving and someone started to back out of a driveway. I let my eyes focus way out in front of me, letting the nearby murals and posters blur as I power-walk my way down the hallways.

Soon I've done multiple laps, I'm cruising at four miles per hour or a bit beyond, and

probably covered over a half mile. I am blasting down these hallways.

Whenever I go for long walks outdoors, I walk ten, fifteen, twenty miles, walking a substantial portion of the hours of the day. But not at this pace. I'm changing it up, it's a good compromise. Burn faster for a shorter interval.

Oh, this is working... this feels good...

"Derek", says Nurse Vicky. "We want to know what's going on with you this evening. We're a little concerned. Do you know you're walking in circles? Do you feel okay? We got a call from Unit One. What are you doing down there? Are you unable to sit still?"

"No. But I don't particularly *want* to sit still. I'm doing this for exercise. "

I explain that I was barred from being in recreational therapy so this is my recreational activity. "I'm not obsessive-compulsive. I'd rather be out on the city sidewalks going for a long walk across town and back, but this will do. Nothing's bothering me. I'm not bothering anybody else, either, or I shouldn't be. I'm just passing through. I'm not in distress, I'm enjoying myself."

Nurse Vicky looks dubious. I resume my progress down the corridor.

= July 28, 1982 (Day Ten) =

I wake up contemplative. Nearly always, that means I was delving into interesting territory while I was semi-asleep, perhaps prompted by previous dreams, and then I came up from there

still turning these thoughts over.

Mark Raybourne wants me to think about whether my tendency to not give a shit whether or not other people approve of my behavior is a tendency that has unhealthy components. Okay. You can consider it a defense mechanism, but you can also consider it the necessary attitude if you're going to move forward. I couldn't afford to care. I was under attack. I had to believe in me. They had to be wrong. Yes, that installs the worry that this is a coping mechanism. Yes, I've worried about that. That maybe my default assumption that I was *right* to believe in me and reject them as wrong was...incorrect, and I...for some reason...deserved this.

I can't talk with Mark about this, because he's Mark and he's not good at this. Yeesh. I think he means well but seriously, inept counselor-person. I don't feel at all understood by him.

But still, back to his question.

*Them.* There's a "them". People not approving of me. I didn't get why. I was a conscientious kid. I remember being in second grade and this girl in our class said something had been stolen out of her desk just now and several people in desks next to her said this one guy, who sat in front of me, that they'd seen him steal it. I knew he hadn't done it, not in that time frame. I didn't like him. He was nasty and he was stupid. He was one of the kids who picked on me whenever he could. He was mean. It wasn't him. I'd have seen him do it. I'd been staring at people in my vicinity for the last ten minutes, just thinking about what would happen to each of us as we got older, became older kids. Anyway, I said so. My word didn't carry much weight. I thought it should, because I thought everyone knew I didn't like him and he didn't like me, so I wasn't coming to his support because I was one of his friends.

People were mad at me, but I remember thinking that I could choose not to care what the other people in the classroom thought. I felt like I'd done the right thing. I also felt like it was important to do what *you* think is the right thing. To care, and to act.

Yeah, so now at the age of 23, I want to reach out to them. Communicate. Share a concept, a set of thoughts, a model that they, too, might find helps them make sense of their experiences. Stuff about gender and sex and sexual orientation. Changing people's map of the possibilities.

This is 1982, the modern sophisticated world. We all know there are gay people. And we've heard them say we all should stop thinking there was something wrong with them. They *liked* who they were. They weren't hurting anybody. They found how to seek out each other, and that's who they wanted, others who were like them. They told us we should quit being all paranoid about it being a way of life that's somehow stalking the rest of us. The lesbians in particular have explained that being on the constant never-ending receiving end of sexual interest from people you aren't sexually interested in is *not* an experience that only hetero males might ever have to wade through. Yeah, fucking hell, sometimes there are people who get hot for you and you aren't so inclined. Learn to deal with it, get used to it, unless they're coercive it's not the end of the world. Even the coercive ones don't get to define our lives.

We also know there is transition. It's in the media, part of the news. I've read *Conundrum: From James to Jan*. And also accounts written by that tennis player, Renee Richards. Oh, yes, of course I've thought about it. Things written by transsexual women resonate with me. A lot of them do. Some of them do not. The notion that it's the wrong body, that does not. I often feel like I'm rejecting that notion the same way gay guys reject the notion that in order for it to be

okay to find male people sexually attractive, they should have been female.

Yeah, it finally congealed for me. That I'm a male person, essentially one of the girls, in the same way that transsexual women know it, but in my case the male body is okay, it's that there exists an identity of malebodied people who are girls or women, whose attraction is to female people. So they're neither transsexuals nor gay guys. It's something else.

Yes I'm describing it as a category of people, an identity, but I defined it, by myself, in isolation, not as part of a community of such people. Exactly how plural does a valid sense of identity need to be? I get to speak for myself, don't I? I didn't start the conversation. Other people calling me things, sticking a hostile label on me, *they* started it. I should get a chance to answer. I've examined the content of what they call me, as well as the hostility attached. I'd rather not be hated...but I'd rather be hated for who I actually am if I can't be accepted for who I am. At least that way I'd be known for who I actually am.

And that *is* who I am. A member of that category of people I formulated, regardless of how many other people recognize themselves in that description.

So... joining other people... I'm open to advice on how to be the most open listener and still stick up for myself, and especially how to find people who would want to have this conversation.

I'm not just trying to join them to have a close community. I'd like that too, of course. I'd be pickier about who I'd try that with. But for the message stuff, I want everybody I can get.

\* \* \*

Psychodrama has Ellen in the hot seat. Her situation is a lot like Emily's: she really wants to get back to her family, her kids in particular.

"C'mon, yell at him. Put him in his place!", Jeremy encourages her.

"What kind of representative are you?", Ellen yells. "I could have just represented myself!"

"But you don't know what you need!", I yell back at her. I've been drafted to be her assigned legal representative and I'm trying to incorporate her description of the guy. Gary, who is subbing for Marie, who is out today, wants me to probe Ellen for ambivalent feelings she may have towards being with her kids. "So you should listen to experts like me, I'm here to help you.", I append.

"Oh, do go fuck yourself", Ellen yells at me.

"Yeah, that's good", Jeremy yells, "but now let's channel that attitude and energy into what you really need her to hear."

Ellen scowls at me in my role. "I know what I need better than you. You're supposed to represent me. Are you going to? Or are you gonna keep helping the other side?"

I'm only learning about Ellen's situation from her descriptions here in psychodrama, but this seems like a healthy attitude to me.

Jeremy and Gary reframe the camera. The others change some of the chairs and paper-mache decor to make it into a new space. A conference room. Ellen and her ex, or estranged husband. I'm there again, advocate and mediator.



“You can still see Andrew. I’m not trying to take him away from you”, says Ronald, playing Ellen’s ex.

“You say that, but you keep yanking him away anyhow. You’re just using him to try to get me to agree to stuff”, Ellen as herself proclaims.

“Now play nice”, I say, making a parody of the kind of thing Ellen said she’s actually heard from her representative. “You can’t expect him to be the only one to make concessions.”

“Oh shut up and fuck off”, Ellen snaps at me. “You are totally not on my side.”

I like this. I hope it helps Ellen. She sounds good.

Psychodrama is my favorite class.

I’m still wondering about my own interest and reaction to Ellen.

\* \* \*

Nobody in our school was out as gay. At least as far as I know. Early to mid 1970s. Small town. Esoteric town, to be sure. But not terribly safe to be different from the categories of people available to be categorized as. I’m sure there had always been gay guys but there was no role for *out* gay guy. Anyone opting for the role would have had to have created it from scratch. I can sure relate to that.

I have to go farther back. Valdosta Georgia, before our family relocated to Los Alamos.

I had met Malcolm in seventh grade at Valdosta Junior High. We'd been in some youth church group which is where he knew me from. I don't know, Methodist Summer Youth Program or equivalent. He did one of those "Hey, I recognize you" things, and although I'm slow to recognize people out of context, I thought I'd for sure seen him before, so when he explained, it fit.

Malcolm liked to talk to me, and early on seemed to find it amusing to try to shock me.

"Let me tell you about these people" was Malcolm's general presentation.

"These people like feet", he'd tell me. "Like they're hot for it, you know? And they hang out around libraries..."

Malcolm, I think in retrospect, probably quickly reconfigured his estimate of my sophistication and experience. Way downward.

"Do you know Betty Johnson?", he asked me. "She's in our classroom for homeroom. Do you think she's cute?"

I always had, since fourth grade. Betty had it.

"Well would you ever want to stick your hand up inside her skirt and feel around?", he posed.

"Umm, no, yeeck, I've known her for a long time, that's creepy."

Malcolm insisted, "She would. You don't believe me? She would. She'd let you do that. Or somebody. But it could be you. She'd like it for the same reason you would."

That the girls might have these same feelings for us like I did for them, interest in the shapes and textures and wanting to touch or perhaps to be touched like that....of course I always hoped

that's how it was, it's not like I hadn't read about it... a lot of rather intense interest, yeah, I wanted to know.

And yeah, I was a really naïve twelve-year-old kid. Isolation does that to a person.

But the way Malcolm was describing it back then... he was like a bridge person, honestly, echoing a lot of the things I'd overheard the *boy* boys say about girls; and still at the same time he made more sense to me. Nobody'd ever asked me about whether I'd want to put my hands up inside some girls' skirt or not. Not that directly. Definitely not Betty Johnson. Or... maybe Betty Johnson. It really changes how you think about it if you think maybe they want it to happen. Malcolm was saying the girls liked it. That would be wonderful. It would be so awful if it was just me, being a pervert, a creep, wanting to touch girl parts. Which was how I still worried, down deep inside, might be the case. I mean, I started having those feelings when I was just barely out of kindergarten, so I started off very self-conscious about it. From the grownups I knew about how babies are made, and I'd heard stories about people falling in love, but nobody ever bothered telling me anything about having an appetite for someone else's body.

Yeah...so, Malcolm. We hung out during recess at Valdosta Junior High. I really didn't have many friends so someone who wanted to hang out with me and be company, that was nice.

One of the interesting kinds of people Malcolm told me about at some point were boys who got fantasies about other boys, and wanted to touch them. Wanted to do sex with them, he told me.

My seventh grade self looked back blankly. I held up my hands and banged my index fingers,

left and right, into each other, tip to tip. I told Malcolm, “That’s not possible, it wouldn’t work!”

Malcolm shook his head. “One of them goes up the butt of the other one. Like being with a girl. It feels a lot the same”

I ewwed a face at him. Gut reaction.

“Well they also lick and suck. With mouth and tongue.” Malcolm looked back at me, confident and gentle. “I’d like to do that if you’d let me.”

“Ha”, I replied. “I’ll pass.”

So that was my first real-life first-hand experience of gay guys. Totally *not* some creepy invasive thing where one guy has a lot of power over the other. Or some creepy salivating begging person who just seems pathetic to you. Or any other stereotype, really. We were both fascinated by difference. He had a lot of interesting tales to tell. I hadn’t thought about sexual variation as a plot device for a story, but yeah it was intrinsically fascinating. Got me thinking more about where the way I was might fit in to all that.

He hit on me. Yes, that happened. He didn’t act like I had no choice, or he was entitled, or fawn at me like oh please, I need this from you. He was okay with it not being something I wanted.

\* \* \*

After eating lunch, I walk back toward the nurses’ station. I see Penelope is on shift. I nod to

her and she comes to the counter.

“Hi! I... have a request, and I’d like you consider whether it’s appropriate,” I tell her, somewhat primly. “I want a chance to read my chart. I could either discuss it or not discuss it with the people who’ve, you know, written in it, I’m okay either way. But I want a chance to see myself through the eyes of the Elk Meadow staff, the way they talk to each other about me and from how the entries are written, how they feel about me and my progress and my goals and so on.”

She contemplates for a moment, and I watch her face below those red bangs. Then she tells me, “It’s not really appropriate. We’d have to censor or, you know, be careful how we said things if we had to take how you’d feel, thinking about you reading entries about you in your chart, having to take that into account whenever we were writing them. Honestly, I don’t think it would do you any harm, you personally. But if we let you, how would we defend not letting everyone else do it? And most people, you know they couldn’t deal with reading their own charts. Let’s get real.”

I nod, not in agreement so much as in acceptance of her logic.

But if patients don’t have the background for understanding the material the professionals put in their charts, they should be taught. It’s not right to take away patients’ involvement in their own care by not bothering to explain things. You don’t tell your heart patients they have “a heart problem” and will be taking “a red pill” every morning. You show them the x-ray, the lab tests, you tell them the explicit diagnosis and what it can mean if not treated and the prognosis if it is. You give them the name of the medicine, you show them the PDR entry for it, and all the

possible side effects, and you discuss all this with them.

It isn't done the same way in psychiatric settings in particular, because it's about how we behave. They don't expect us to have...what's their term for it? *"insight into our illness"*. And also, I think, because their diagnostic categories aren't based on quantitative lab results. Their diagnostics don't rise above opinions. Okay, a little bit of pattern recognition, to be fair, I'm not saying they aren't the opinions of educated professionals. But the profession starts with pathology assumptions when trying to make sense of the patterns they see. So the patient often ends up being "helped" by someone with the attitude "who you are is all wrong".

\* \* \*

"Thanks for being flexible about the time," Mark says. He had had something else going on that conflicted with our regular individual counseling session, so he'd asked if we could meet early afternoon. He knows my schedule, and it's not as if I was likely to have penciled in a dentist's visit or a wine tasting, but nice of him to ask me instead of telling me.

"We need to talk," he tells me. "About your excursions up and down the hall. It's attracting a lot of attention."

I nod. *Yes, and?*

"Most people aren't comfortable in a social situation if everyone else thinks they're behaving oddly. So it's not just that you're walking around and around like a robot, it's also the fact that you don't show any sign of recognizing how odd this looks to everyone else. A lot of people on

the staff are saying this shows a worrisome lack of insight, and we're all concerned that you're in some type of emotional turmoil."

"That's interesting," I reply. "My nursing instructor brought that up to me once. I had just had a patient die on me while I was away at lunch, and she had me clean him up for the family to come in and have a final visit. So I was still in the patient's room when they all came trooping in, a minister with a Bible and three or four middle-aged people and an older woman with a cane. They didn't speak to me, so I didn't speak to them. And the minister said a prayer and we all stood there like that for awhile. My nursing instructor said they all kept looking over at me, wondering why I was there in the room, and she found it weird that I didn't react to that at all. She said they clearly expected me to leave so the family could be with the man in privacy. But they were all standing between me and the door and it felt like it would be more disruptive to push past them, and I didn't mind being there, he'd been my patient for all the good I'd done him, and it felt disrespectful to dash off like I have more important things to do than stand here honoring the dead. So, yeah, I can be pretty oblivious to being the focus of attention if nobody's actually saying anything."

"Doesn't it occur to you that nobody else goes on a purposeless march and makes a spectacle of themselves in the corridor? Everyone here is trying to get better. Healthier. Nobody wants to look like they're having some kind of breakdown! So either you really are experiencing a breakdown or there's something fundamentally wrong, that you don't care how people perceive you!"

"I've been blocked from going out for recreation. I was already not getting enough exercise,

so if the hospital's going to keep me indoors, I'm going to get my exercise this way. Simple as that. If nobody's going to bother to just ask me why I'm doing it, it must not matter much to them."

"Well, people are usually reluctant to point out that someone's behaving strangely. They don't want to embarrass the other person."

"I haven't found that to be true. All my life people have made a point of coming up to me and telling me I'm strange."

"I was hoping you'd give some more thought to it maybe not being in your best interests to not care what other people think about you. I spoke to you about this just the other day. Clearly, it didn't seem to have any effect, because next thing I know, you're out here pretending you're a wind-up toy instead of a human being!"

"I actually have been giving it quite a bit of thought. It's an interesting topic. What you need to realize is that I've spent a lifetime having people react to me as if I'm weird. They mostly weren't very nice about it, and mocked me and made fun of me and called me names. I learned not to care because how else would you keep them from getting to you? I was never going to blend in."

I pause for a moment, reminded of a line of thought I'd pursued once or twice before. "That was less true for my sister. Jan didn't easily fit in everywhere. Whenever we moved, or changed school systems, I think she had to work at it to make new friends, get people to accept her, avoid being the kid that other people leave out or make fun of. I think she put some effort into tucking in any odd corners so people couldn't see. Popularity was important to her; I don't mean she was



super popular, most popular girl in the class or anything like that, but popular *enough*. Accepted. But that wasn't an option for me. I wasn't merely some kid who was seen by some as having something about them that was a little different. I was the kid that everyone in the school heard about from the other kids before they ever saw me. I had a reputation that had stuff that people made up about me added to what was already there, and being stared at was not something I was going to be able to avoid. I remember kids from other classrooms bringing their friends with them to point me out through the open classroom door, you know, 'See, over there, that's him'. So I have a lifetime of training that's made it pretty much invisible to me.

"That means even if I agree with you, which I partly do, by the way, that it probably costs me certain things, that's like saying 'Gee, you know, if you're moving to Spain, you'd be better off if your primary language was Spanish instead of English'; you can say it and it may be true but a person doesn't just decide to switch languages and the next day they're thinking and talking Spanish. Just because you don't notice any difference in my behavior doesn't mean I'm not thinking about what you said."

"What does speaking Spanish have to do with walking around and around and around in the hallway?"

I sigh.

\* \* \*

I'm at the piano, noodling around, not playing anything in particular, just improvising.

Making sounds and textures.

Ellen, Jake, and April come over. I stop pushing keys and let the sound fade.

“April wants to ask you something”, Jake tells me.

“If this is weird, just tell me,” April begins. She’s got her thumbs through her belt loops and hands in her front pockets, contemplating me. But then she breaks eye contact and seems on the verge of blushing. I wait, tight and twisted around on the piano bench to face her and the others.

“She likes that song you sometimes sing, about hitchhiking”, Ellen prompts, when April doesn’t continue.

“Oh! Well, ...cool!”

“I want to sing it”, April explains. “If you teach me the words. I caught some of them. I mean, if you’re okay with that.”

“Oh, that’s great, I love it whenever I can get someone else to sing things I’ve written! Yeah, so let me get some paper. I’ll just write down the words. And I can put the chord changes, like F sharp or B minor or whatever, if that helps?”

There are four verses, plus a “na na na” verse at the end; the third verse has a different melody line, that’s the high part, the rest are all on the main tune. I jot them down real quick. April says not to bother with the chords. “It’s a good tune, it catches in your head, that’s what made me think about singing it.”

We run through it. April is squaring off the rhythm, plodding through it as a plain four-beat instead of the syncopated eight-based tune it’s supposed to be. That takes away the driving

energy and I keep trying to correct her without being annoying about it. But it's supposed to go *one* two three *four* five six seven eight and she's singing it *one* two three four *five* six seven eight.

Then I hear what she's doing with it. It's a more tired, resigned song the way she's singing it, more bluesey instead of defiantly angry. Plodding is a good word for it, but that's not a bad thing. Walking all worn out and sunburned by the side of the road. It's just a different song the way April's singing it. I quit trying to shoehorn her voice into the song the way I wrote it. I ask her if she wants me to slow it down just a bit and she nods.

= July 29, 1982 (Day Eleven) =

I adjust the water temp to a couple notches cooler than scalding and climb in, closing the shower door behind me. I like the pressure of the water against my head, the hot, the surrounding steam.

After toweling off, I stretch out on top of the bed for awhile, letting the remaining moisture evaporate or get absorbed by the bedspread. Then I put clothes on and ease out into the corridor.

Mark approaches me in the cafeteria. "Hey, just a heads up. We have a new admission, Charlie Harris, and he's gonna be sharing your room."

I suppose that was inevitable. It's been nice having the room to myself all this time. "Thanks for letting me know."

As I drink my orange juice and finish the last of my hash browns, Jake slides into the seat

across from me. He's glaring, and his mouth is twisted in irritation and disgust. There's a split-second tension before I realize that he's here to share it with me, not direct it towards me. After a couple moments, he starts talking.

"I got Gary Fucking Stevens all up in my face, man. What was that you said awhile back about everyone needs a sharp poke with a stick sometimes? I gotta do me some poking. This place is really starting to piss me off."

"What's he saying to you?"

"Apparently, 'The Team' have decided April and me shouldn't be together as a couple, because we're not ready and we'll interfere with each other's recovery. That's a crock of shit. It's not like we're fucking setting up housekeeping and sharing the rent and popping out kids or something. She's got her room and I got mine, so what the fuck do they want us to stop, like are we supposed to not sit together?" Jake widens his eyes, lifting his eyebrows, and spreads his arms wide.

"I suspect Barnes is involved in this. Emily once told me the other staff don't make decisions like that without him having input."

"Oh, for fucking sure, you know he's got his finger in that. Old Sneaky Pete with his smooth talk, he likes all the thank yous and the appreciation, and he sure likes to sell this place, I bet he could make a killing in real estate. He starts with 'Oh I just want to give you a chance in life, sign here, you deserve to have people care', and then it's 'Oh, now that you signed on, I need to take something away from you, what can I take away from you today, let's see...', and he's like the kid who likes to pull the wings off of flies. 'Oh, were you attached to that? Like wow, I

think you're way too dependent on that wing, little fly'."

"Whoa, that's cold", I say admiringly. "Pretty accurate, I think, but wow. Well, what can they actually do? Kick you two out?"

"Yeah, no shit. Bring it on. Barnes sending little Gary to tell me what 'The Team' has decided. 'The Team' can kiss my ass."

\*       \*       \*

I'm idly hovering in the vicinity of our unit's nurses' station. It's not that I've made close friends of all the nurses; more that I find something reassuring about the rhythms and professionalism at this intersection of medical and office work.

I hear the click clack of the Selectric typewriters, the booble-booble-boop of the multi-line office phones, the muted chatter of people doing their tasks. One of the nurses opens a cardboard box and unpacks bandages and cotton balls and carries them to where they stock them.

I watch Nurse Vicky signal to the other nurses to handle the phones, then go back past the racks of medicines and syringes and stuff and into the staff bathroom. She closes the door and I hear the faint chink of the lock turning. We don't have locks on our own bathroom doors. Or even our bedroom doors for that matter. It's not for us to decide to put a door between us and the rest of this place. I've had bonus privacy they hadn't officially planned on giving me, due to being without a roommate all this time, but that's soon coming to an end.

I stare for a little while longer, thinking.

I often think better when I'm in motion. I begin doing my corridor laps. Down towards Unit One. Right turn. Across to Unit Three. Back up and past the cafeteria to Unit Four. Over again to Unit Two. Various eyes track my progress as I go. I see a few nurses lift their heads from their paperwork as I blast by them with my long strides. Down to Unit One again. Past the hallway that goes to the entrance foyer. Right turn at the end of Unit Three. Sailing past the piano. Right turn and the approach to Unit Two again.

But this time, instead of continuing down the corridor, I make a sudden left into the nurse's station itself. Nurse Vicky looks up with a belated startle as I stride past her, still moving at my brisk hiking pace, my fingers snagging my own chart out of the chromium wire rack as I zoom by. I continue past the medicines and supply shelves and into the currently empty nurse's station bathroom. I immediately whirl and lock the door behind me.

I perch on the seat. Flip to page one and begin reading. Intake sheet. Address and social security and date of birth and all that. Flip. MMPI interpretation. Rorschach interpretation. Signs of confused mental processing. Antisocial elements. Favorable clinical prospects.

Flip. Dr. James Barnes' signature on my diagnosis. *Paranoid schizophrenic with delusional content*. DSM-III code numbers following that.

Flip.

BANG. BANG. BANG. "Open up, Derek! What are you doing in there? You are not supposed to be in this bathroom. I need you to come out of there!" BANG. BANG.

Nurse's notes, dated timed and signed. "Continues to display inappropriate behavior." "Withdrawn. Hostile." "Still not engaging with others." "Very little affect, uncommunicative."

BANG. BANG. BANG. “Derek?? Did you take your chart? I need you to give that back!”

BANG. BANG. “Right now! Open this door!”

Flip. Group notes. Psychodrama notes. Individual counseling notes. “Still rejects all opportunities to integrate.” “Still continues to display inappropriate behavior.” “Constantly and deliberately uncooperative.”

There are many more voices now. Male voices. Mark. Gary. “If you open up, you won’t be in any trouble.” “If you don’t open this door you’re going to be in so much trouble.” “C’mon now. I don’t have patience for this!” BANG. BANG. KICK!! “What do you want me to do, he’s got the door locked” “Go see if there’s a key for opening it from the outside” BANG. BANG.

“Derek, are you in there reading your chart?” Dr. Barnes’ voice.

“Yes I am”, I reply.

“Derek, you shouldn’t be doing that. It could be very disturbing for you. These are medical evaluations that you don’t have the training to understand!”

Flip. Drug tests. Urine. Blood. Flip. Weight. Blood pressure. Respiration. Temp.

Flip. I, Edward Turner, relationship father, do authorize Dr. James Barnes to involuntarily impose any treatments deemed necessary for the care of Derek Turner, dated and signed.

Flip.

When I’m done reading, I unlatch the bathroom door, hand my chart to Dr. Barnes with a smile, and walk back out of the nurses’ station.

\* \* \*

“What we all want you to keep in mind”, Mark repeats, “is that all this medical jargon isn’t a statement about what we think of you. A lot of it is for insurance purposes. And a lot of what gets written is very depersonalizing, but that’s because it was never intended that the subject who is being written about would see it.”

“Well, I assume that it’s written with the notion that *somebody* will read it”, I counter. “I would imagine people starting their shift would read the notes to see what happened in the previous shift. Or a new employee starts work here, they’d read the chart to get a sense of who the patient is.”

“The point is, you shouldn’t try to interpret what you saw. I know you’re proud of being, what was it, an LPN nurse, oh but you never finished. So you were a nursing *student*. Think about that. Don’t you think you might be reaching outside your range to be deciding that you’re on par with medical professionals?”

“Well, not particularly, no.” I leave it at that.

Mark sighs and shifts tactics. “Look, you’re smart... I don’t get it, why do you insist on playing this game? Get out of here!”

Which has, admittedly, been a part of my own thought processes for a while now. I keep thinking I should just call it quits and get out of this place. Maybe it’s a sort of paradoxical confirmation that I *belong* in a place like this if I don’t have the common sense to recognize that it’s not helping me to be here.



\* \* \*

I meet my roommate Charlie Harris for the first time in NA. Gary has him introduce himself.

“I’m Charlie, Charlie Harris, y’all. Yeah, I’ve been in Dallas mostly, last few years. Got busted for possession and intent and the DA said do time or rehab and probation.”

That prompts going around the circle and summarizing our own situations. “Pretty much the same”, Jake says. “Houston though.”

“Pain meds”, Ellen tells us, “then when I couldn’t get any more, street shit and baggies. I started off smoking it, but my cousin told me how expensive compared to learning to shoot, and how much nicer it feels. I didn’t get busted, I OD’d, and my husband said I could lose him and the kids or I could lose the habit.”

Ronald and Valerie relate their background stories in a similar fashion, and then it gets around to me.

”My parents knew I smoke marijuana and drop acid occasionally, and they’re worry warts about any use whatsoever of illegal *druuugs*, so they pressured me into signing in”, I summarize.

The others in the group had been incredulous back when I’d first explained this. Charlie’s reaction is different. “Whoa, that’s some dumbass parents you got, no offense. Serious? Huh! Well, I guess you can learn what *real* drugs are all about now, got yourself a crash course. You want to learn how to melt it on a spoon, don’tcha? Suck it up into a needle. Rehab for acid!

Like, what, orange sunshine on fucking blotter? They catch you seeing trails and for that, they put you in here?” He shakes his head. “Rehab for tripping. Jesus Christ, that’s fucked up.”

Gary inserts himself. “LSD may not be addictive, but it’s still a maladaptive habit. And marijuana use can lead to experimentation with other drugs, and it’s how a lot of people in here got started on the path.”

Charlie just stares at him, not looking very impressed.

\* \* \*

Jake and April aren’t openly opposing the staff edict that they shouldn’t be latching on to each other as a couple. But they aren’t really in compliance either. They sit slightly apart from each other at all the structured scheduled activities they’re in together, but you can see from their eye contact and the way whenever one of them is speaking, the other is focused on listening, that they’re still very keyed into each other. And they sit together in the cafeteria and walk together in the corridors.

We’re in the piano alcove, with Valerie and Noelle and a new admission, Tuyen, and a few more chairs have been dragged into the space. I warm April’s voice up with some scales. “I never did this before, just jumped in to singing the song. No, it’s okay. It’s cool. It’s like I’m a serious singer like Pat Benatar or something.”

I launch into The Hitchhiker’s Song, paced to April’s achier blues version. A bit more hesitation and crash on the piano lead-in, emphasizing the beat by anticipating it and cascading

into it and ending just a touch behind the beat and therefore behind her voice. I'm hearing the song differently because of how she sings it. April doesn't fill the airspace with a ringing voice so much as she brings us in close, a sonic intimacy. I'm proud; my song, I wrote that. I liked it before but she's showing me what else it could be.

"I needed this. This is so cool. I didn't know we had a music component." It's Tuyen, the new gal. "Do I get signed up to be a part of this automatically? Hey, you, what's your name?"

"I'm April. This isn't really part of the program. This is just us. Do you sing?"

"Some. Not like you."

Jake says, "She sounds like she does this for a living, don't she? It's like Janis Joplin or something, right?"

April looks shy as she acknowledges the praise. "I think I'm actually looking ahead to finding out what comes next. You know, after I get out of Elk Meadow. I never wanted to look very far in front of me, it was always about just trying to get through today. I told Derek the other day I didn't think he could count on doing this for a living. I don't think I can either. But I could have a life, you know? Maybe with Jake." April glances warmly at him. "Or maybe not, but something, right? I could be in an office, or helping old people, I don't know, shopping for them or something. It's been so fucking long since I looked forward to anything."

\* \* \*

In the big group, Dr. Barnes makes a couple of attempts to provoke me about having read my

chart, but I'm not really in the mood to rise to the bait, and bait is all he's offering. To be honest, I'm belatedly a bit in shock about the *paranoid schizophrenic* diagnosis. I mean bloody fucking hell. That's no doubt what everyone means when they urge me not to interpret or pay a lot of attention to the medical entries I read on my charts.

On the other hand, the folks back at Mountain View two years ago stuck me with *manic-depressive*.

Which has been renamed since then, they starting calling it *bipolar disorder*. By either name, though, a "major psychosis." Just like *paranoid schizophrenic*.

I wonder if Elk Meadow would have labeled me the same way as Mountain View if they'd had access to my old charts. I don't think these psychiatrists have a specific sense of what they think's wrong with me, and more like they just see me as "wrong" and so they affix a label. I don't think they strongly care about how we're different, aside from an attempt to predict us a bit. We aren't to be understood, we're to be contained.

*Paranoid schizophrenic* ...that would be where it's your *cognitive* stuff more centrally than your emotional state that's regarded as messed up. And that's me. That's how the Elk Meadow folk view me. That's how I'm coming across. For me, it's not about how totally fine versus how sick in the head I am, it's about how that's the state of communication. That's how poorly I'm managing to make myself understood, and unfortunately I've decided I care about that and have been putting some effort into it. Not a good grade.

I don't think anything's wrong with my head but I'm not quite ready to talk about this in group. Instead I just listen and probably come across as really smug and obnoxious.

\* \* \*

I didn't write any songs about Mountain View Hospital, the loony bin I got tossed into two years ago in Albuquerque. I never went to them expecting some kind of help or thinking I needed any.

What happened there was that I came out on campus. As best as I could, anyway. Coming out is complicated when the world doesn't already have a word or a concept for who and how you are. But I stopped careening and ricocheting back and forth between being the person it felt like I naturally was, then getting shocked once again by rediscovering I was regarded as feminine or gay or a failure to be a viable man, and finally recoiling from the twin unwanted fates of either being consigned to homosexuality or emulating the straight males I didn't want to resemble in the slightest. Because those were the only social roles out there. So I'd go back to just being myself and decide I didn't care. But that's where I came in, if you see what I mean. Over and over and over.

I came out as a heterosexual sissy. A feminine person, effectively one of the girls, one who happened to be male, one who happened to be sexually drawn towards the female people. That wasn't out there as an identity that people were known to have, but

I was going to fix that.

Almost overnight I went from being very high-strung and insecure and worried to being confident and giddy with joy. Liking the person that I was. Affirmatively embracing my identity.

People had been dropping snide little barbed hints into conversation, saying things about me without coming right out and saying them concretely — what I had come to think of as ‘insinuendos’ — and all of a sudden I was doing it back at them, inventing my own double entendres, additional layers of meaning. I threw people off balance, I shocked people, I converted their sometimes creepy curiosity about what flavor of person I was into *their* problem, not my problem. I’m making it sound like they were all a bunch of sharklike socially hostile predatory people, and that’s actually mostly not so, a *lot* of people seemed really glad to see me happy and confident, but if you were at the beach and just a *few* of the fishes swimming around in your vicinity were sharks, they’d occupy a disproportionate amount of your attention, if you see what I mean. Now for the first time in my life I could snark right back and imply an alternative narrative to the kinds of things they liked to imply.

Meanwhile, I was also attempting more serious communication. Writing manifestos, analyses, explanatory pieces. And reading everything about sexual orientation and gender identity I could get my hands on, the most useful and relevant of which I found to be feminist theory. Rejecting sexist expectations and double standards and theorizing upward from there.

Right in the midst of all that, the woman who ran the campus Rape Crisis Center read some feminist poetry at an open-mike event in an off-campus coffeehouse I’d started hanging out at, and I thought I’d really like her opinion on one of the pieces I’d written, if she’d be willing to give it. Came by her office. She was out, but an office staffer let me put my paper with a note in her campus mailbox.

She didn’t understand it well enough to have any sense of what my agenda might be, and felt

threatened. That started campus police into asking around, and people described my behavior as changed and odd, intense and enthusiastic and full of ideas I wanted to discuss.

Here at Elk Meadow, Jake keeps referring to Dr. Barnes as ‘Sneaky Pete’ and has implied several times that he feels like he was conned into signing something without fully understanding it. Well, back then, I had my own Sneaky Pete. At the University Health Center, an official on the clinic staff asked if I’d be willing to talk to the psychiatrist so we could “rule out that there’s anything for us to be worried about” and then said in order to talk to the psychiatrist I had to sign a permission form. This so-called ‘permission form’ was actually a voluntary commitment. So that’s how I ended up in Mountain View Psychiatric Hospital.

I understand about her feeling threatened. The Rape Crisis Center Coordinator, I mean. I’m embarrassed when I look back, because I should have been able to predict that I had to approach anyone in her office with caution. But this was then...

I dealt with Mountain View by starting my own local chapter of Mental Patients’ Liberation Front, and even though they were utterly coercive and we had no rights to speak of, I managed to get most of the patients in agreement that we should listen to each other and be mutually supportive, and try to ignore the horrible treatment the institution was subjecting us to. And I also got the support of a significant percent of the staff members, to the point that it polarized the institution and disrupted its functioning. I was making sense to a lot of people, and making the official structure of jackbooted authoritarian ways look silly and indefensible. Upper echelon

clinical staff eventually decided I was a rabble raising psychiatric rights activist and booted me out, as if they'd caught me trespassing. Yeah. I not only survived that, I was *winning*. Of course, then I was back out on my own, and disenrolled from all my college courses, *and* I still had no one's ear. I still had it all to do. To figure out how to communicate with the entire world about this stuff.

Here at Elk Meadow, it's all velvet glove, not iron hand. They like to do that reward and punishment oriented behavior modification stuff; but guess what, I've already gone toe to toe with much more coercive setups, bars in every window and our shoelaces and belts taken away, forced psychiatric drugging at the drop of a hat, seclusion rooms, and straitjackets. It seems to me like if, here in Elk Meadow, I make as much sense as I think I do, I should be able to win people over. I came in hoping I could explain and that people would listen. But inside the velvet glove, the institutional staff here aren't about listening, they just want to reprogram us. So maybe I take my gloves off too.

I still think I *do* make sense. Including not only the stuff about my own issues but also how therapeutic processes ought to take place in general. And value systems, priorities and principles, all that. Barnes and his staff really don't seem to have much to offer. So, if I'm affecting people in here...maybe they — the ones who just like to push our buttons to make us react — will gradually lose their grip on the whole social situation. I'm seeing lots of cracks in the "Everybody Loves Elk Meadow" façade that was so smooth and polished when I came in. I'm angry, both about the stuff that I went through as a child and about the situations I still find myself in as an adult. I've got stuff to say to the world and the combination of anger and



confidence is letting me enjoy these confrontations. *I'm kicking, I'm making contact, watch me go.*

That, I admit to myself, is a dangerous line of thought, and arrogant as hell. It's exciting and fun and challenging, to try to beat them at their own game like that. Those aren't good reasons for doing it. Tell me, please, that I'm not just as addicted to winning and beating an adversary as I tend to suspect Dr. Barnes is. I do believe in patients' rights and patient self-determination and the importance of compassionate understanding in listening to people unpack their concerns and delve into their own heads. And those *would* be good reasons for doing it.

But I need to be wary of signing on for pissing contests and pretending it's for some higher purpose. Seriously. If that's the main lure here, the delight of beating them and the prospect of disrupting how this place functions instead of it being able to change me, that's not a healthy motivation and I should just get the hell out.

\* \* \*

Charlie's in my room when I go in. Our room, rather. He glances up from a Columbia House record and tape catalog. "Hey. It's Timothy Leary, the LSD addict. How's it hanging?"

"Hey", I say in return. "I didn't see you at group." Don't know why I'm bringing that up.

"I was in back. What was the doc going on about you doing something with your chart and all that?"

"I wanted to read my chart. They didn't want to let me, so I swiped it and read it without permission."

Charlie doesn't seem interested in details. He says, "I also hear you broke out of this joint to go have a night in town. That's utterly, I mean yeah, utterly righteous. What'ja do? Go to a titty bar? That's what I'd do. One o' them places with oh mama hot stuff in a g string! I'd have my tongue in that crevice so fuckin' fast...get her a'squealin', heh?"

I never know how to respond to this kind of stuff. I find female morphology cute as hell too but it's like we're on totally different channels about how that feels, me and guys like this.

"So look dude", Charlie says to me, "due to us being roommates and all, I just gotta know. Tell me you ain't no fuckin' Dallas goddam Cowboys fan. No way I'm bunkin' with some fuckin' Cowboys pussy, it's Oilers all the way, am I right?"

"That's the Houston team, isn't it?", I reply, surprising myself by possessing that knowledge. "Isn't that a little unusual, you coming from Dallas yourself and all?"

Charlie stares at me. "'That's the Houston team, isn't it?'" he mocks in a thin pretend-British voice. "Goddam, where the fuck did they dig you up from? What are you, hoity toity Lord Fuckleroy? Oh yeah, right, you got parents who put you here cuz you do orange sunshine and smoke fucking *pot*. Jesus, just shoot me."

\* \* \*

I can't relax, I can't unwind. This is my bedroom and I'm not sure I can sleep here. How did

Charlie put it? *Jesus just shoot me.* Yeah. Bloody fucking hell, this is just what I needed.

Why do I have to be automatically assigned a male roommate? In all my life, never once have I been given a female roommate, a stranger I don't know who just happens to be female. They don't do that to them, because most of them would feel unsafe, and unable to be comfortable in their space. But nobody blinks an eye about dumping me in with some random male person. And in some important ways I'm just as different.

I remember being a fifth grader at Sallas-Mahone Elementary. We had scheduled bathroom breaks just before lunchtime. Our teachers would march us down the halls and then release us into the sex-segregated facilities while they waited outside, and then they'd take us to lunch. It meant I was in there with other boys. With our pants down. They were obscene. They swapped what they called *dirty jokes* but they weren't at all funny, they were just stories about someone who had to pee or shit and something didn't go right. Someone pooped in their pants. Or peed all over something or someone by accident. They were nasty. They acted like this was some kind of release, whooping it up.

At some point between third grade and fifth grade they might have also started talking about sex.

If they did, I didn't notice at the time.

Because if they did, they made it sound like pee and shit.

I was naïve maybe, but they were disgusting.

Oh yeah, they didn't like me. They were invasive. They'd say stuff to me, or about me to their friends from a foot away, while I was trying to pee.

I wanted privacy, like I had at home. I always walked all the way to the very far left, the last urinal, where I could turn my body towards the wall and away from anyone else and not be in plain sight.

I remember once when school had let out and I had to pee and I went in and I was the only person except for the janitor, who was mopping the floor. The janitor got angry because I walked all the way to the far end like I usually did. And therefore meant all that floor space had to be remopped. I didn't mean to make more work for him. Just habit.

\* \* \*

There's no real rule against us being out of our rooms at night. And I can't sleep. I slip off to the darkened cafeteria. I'm not the only one still up. Valerie, the new girl Tuyen, and April are sitting at a table. I'd like to join them but I just got finished thinking about things like why girls don't end up with random guys assigned to them as roommates. I like to think I wouldn't be experienced as an intrusive presence but Charlie probably doesn't think there's any reason he'd be one for me, either. But Valerie sees me and waves me over. "This is Derek", she tells Tuyen.

"Yeah, the piano dude. We met. Hi again."

Valerie turns mostly to April, but she's including the rest of us as she apparently continues where she left off. "So often, if you tell a guy something like that, he gets pissed off. You tell Jake your future might or might not include him, and he's just like 'Yeah, that's how it is'. I

gotta tell you, that was pretty cool. It's not like he doesn't care enough about you to give a shit whether you include him, it's more like 'Yeah, I accept she gets to decide, but hey babe, I'm there if you want'. I mean, that's the way I'm seeing it."

April nods. "You have to understand something. I'm completely fucked up. So it has to be true that he's totally like that and all concerned about what's good for me. That way, I'm guilty of looking at it the other way. Being a self-centered bitch for thinking he doesn't love me enough to get mad that I said that. But it *also* has to be true that it's *not* like that, so I actually don't mean anything to him either. That way I'm wrong to be angry, but I also don't get to have anything turn out nice. I have to look for the absolute shittiest possibilities and worry about them first. It doesn't matter if they're all wrong. I can't relax with what's left over and get into what else is possible until I've dealt with the worst possible way that things might be."

I stare at her and to my horror I start laughing. Oh god I hope she thinks it's kind of funny too or oh fuck I didn't mean to hurt her. But yeah, she grins.

"Fucking hell. You get it. I know you do. There's not too many I can talk to when I'm like this. Ellen. Jake. Anyway, we're getting to know Tuyen. Hey, Tuyen. You're joining a select group here, I tell you. Welcome to the 9th Inner Circle of Nether Hell, you get your fucking pitchfork in the mail, but start raking some coals barehanded while you wait, okay?"

Tuyen shrugs. "I mighta been through worse hell. Don't seem to end. Nice to meet you."

Several nods.

Pause.

Valerie turns to me. "Fuckin' A, man, you read your chart! That was awesome! They were

blamming on the door and shouting. I can't believe you did that!"

I'm glowing.

April leans in. "I'm curious, dude, I have to ask. Why didn't you stay gone when you got out? You don't think you need this place. You found out what they're about here a long time ago. But you got the chance to split and you're still here."

I nod. "I was asking myself the same thing just a few hours ago. I don't know for sure. I got a nasty suspicion I've conned myself into thinking I can change this place. There's communication. It isn't equal communication but there's a lot of it. There's a shitload of it. I got real problems in life, and yeah, I'd like to get some help, but more important, I'm *pissed* about some stuff, and I want someone to listen. I want to grab the world and shake it. I got a chance to get people to listen in here, but I still want to remain in charge of steering myself, you know? I have a lot of people's ears, the staff plus all the people they treat here. Or at least Unit Two. But that's really grandiose, thinking I can make it go my way. I've been thinking lately I should've just kept going."

I sneeze, and wipe my nose. Stupid summer plants with their stupid pollen. Why am I allergic to a bunch of stupid plants? Valerie offers me a napkin.

I continue, "I don't know. I know I'm mad at them. I can't seem to decide whether I want to take my marbles and go home or stick around and give them a faceful of what they need to hear."

Tuyen pronounces, "That's heavy dude!"

I take my leave from the women shortly after that and quietly slip into the bed I get to call my own in this place.

= July 30, 1982 (Day Twelve) =

Before I leave my room...what used to be my room... I carefully ink “Continues to display Derek behavior” onto a small piece of paper, then carefully cut it out, making a circle with the scissors, and attach it to a modified paper clip, and wire it to my shirt, so I can wear it like a button.

I think: Derek S. Turner, paranoid schizzy, human being, patient. *Derek S. Turner, PS, HB, Pt.*

I should redo my name plaque and put it back on my door. I have new credentials now.

\* \* \*

During morning meeting, Irma announces the release of Emily into the outside world. She did the system, she’s a legitimate graduate of Elk Meadow. We should realize this is a genuine certification. The facility has a network on the outside, Irma tells us. People hire the folks who stuck with the program. New lives, new opportunities.

Emily stands in front of us. She doesn’t look triumphant or apprehensive. Mostly distant. Whatever’s on her mind, I don’t think it’s this space or us right now. I give her a thumbs up anyhow.

\* \* \*

I don't find Mark Raybourne to be a good listener, at least not for me; he's always in a hurry to snap whatever you say into some picture he's already got in his mind, and he's not the most patient person either. But at least he makes an effort to come across as friendly and relatable.

Sitting across from Gary Stevens in Narcotics Anonymous, I'm struck with how totally different Mark's style is from Gary's. Gary's long jeans legs are extended out in front of him, knees angled out wide, and he's slouched low in his plastic chair. He likes to link his palms behind his head and lean backwards to stare at whoever he's focusing on, armpits out, mocking contempt on face. Gonna bully you misbehaving rejects into a more therapeutically productive space.

After intoning some canned twelve step invocations, Gary starts flicking verbal jabs at me. "I don't see any sign of you owning up to your own behaviors", he says. "What do the rest of y'all think, if someone broke into your car or came in through your bedroom window, wouldn't you expect at least an admission, 'Yeah, sorry, I went somewhere I didn't belong'? Can you admit that much?"

"As the rest of y'all are possibly aware", I reply, "Gary here is alluding to me reading my own medical chart. Or at least I assume he is."

"Yeah, maybe that's what you were doing. Or maybe you were hoping to find some meds that weren't prescribed for you. Too bad they don't keep none of that stuff in the nurse's station."



I don't reply to that.

"You think you're smarter than anyone else, so you get to do whatever you want. Until you outgrow that, you're going to keep ending up in deep shit. The rest of us can see that clearly enough. But don't expect sympathy. We got our own lives to deal with. We've tried extending a hand to you but I'm just about done with that. You don't impress me or anyone else."

I don't reply to that either.

"You're drowning in the sea and we're trying to throw you a lifeline to pull yourself out, but you're convinced the air is what's making you choke and you think you can breathe the ocean."

"No, Gary, you're trying to throw a boat anchor at my head, because you're convinced that swimming is what causes drowning, since all the drowning people you ever met were trying to swim. You keep offering to cure me of swimming, for my own good, but that doesn't look so appealing from where I am."

Ronald is sitting by Charlie and says to him loud enough to carry, "Here we go again, can you believe this shit?"

Ellen looks irritated too.

Gary looks smug.

\* \* \*

Tuyen's on the psychodrama hot seat. She doesn't look especially pleased about it.

"Why don't you start with what you were saying this morning?", Noelle prompts her. "Or

are you backing down from that?”

Tuyen scowls.

“You may not be comfortable exploring your hot buttons”, Marie says. “But going outside of our comfort zones is sometimes the only way we can grow.”

“All I said”, Tuyen says, crossing her arms, “is that white girls don’t get thought of as opium users automatically. We do. I never said you had a racist attitude or anything. But it’s out there. ‘Slanty eyed bitch’, that’s what people are thinking, ‘your people brought heroin dens into the world, of course you know where to get some, your mama probably sells it out of your home.’ You think I can’t see it in people’s faces? What you mean by ‘stick with winners’, you think I don’t know? Don’t hang out with the Asian girl. You know she’s going back to using.”

“First you say you’re not accusing me of a racist attitude”, Noelle argues, “but then you pop off with that, can you hear yourself?”

“Not everybody who doesn’t like being around you is being a racist”, Ellen adds.

“Sometimes it is, but sometimes maybe you’re giving them good reason. Look in the mirror.”

Jeremy jumps in. “Racism is a real problem, and I think we need to authenticate that. Tuyen, we’re not saying it’s only in your head. But maybe, just maybe, you reach for that sometimes when your own behavior could use a review. Can you consider that might be the case?”

“All the guys want to have a hot Asian woman”, Amanda interjects, “so this race thing can work in more than one direction.”

Tuyen snaps, “Yeah, a hot exotic little pet! Damn, what *is* this pile on crap?”

“Yeah, Amanda, that’s kind of fucked up”, Valerie says. “I don’t know what it’s like to be a minority, but I don’t think it’s an advantage. Maybe Tuyen’s got to consider stuff but I don’t think we’re the ones to tell her she’s wrong about racist attitudes.”

I nod in agreement.

“I don’t think none of us really knows what it’s like to be in another person’s skin”, George says. “But it’s not just because of pride that I’m always aware of being a Black man. World ain’t gonna let me forget it. We all have our own shit we have to sort out, but I don’t think it’s right to make out like seeing people with racial attitudes is hostile when it happens all the time.”

People nod.

“I think it’s easy for us as white people to get all defensive whenever anyone brings race up”, I say. “We want racism to go away. But a lot of time we act like we just want the issue to go away. Meanwhile, people who aren’t white want it all to go away too, but they don’t usually get all defensive.”

There are a lot of nods to that too.

“The attitudes that Tuyen spoke of”, Jeremy comments, “I think there’s something similar going on with prosecutors’ attitudes towards Afro-American substance abusers. You don’t see many Black clients here at Elk Meadow, you ever wonder about that? I think the diversion programs, they aren’t something the judges and prosecutors even think of when they’re discussing the sentencing of Black offenders, they don’t see them as people who can be rescued from the habit.”

George nods in slow motion.

Marie wants Noelle and Tuyen to apologize to each other for any hurt feelings or misunderstandings. They do, sort of, each of them apologizing for the fact that the other one got the wrong idea.

\* \* \*

Noelle glances at the cards in her hands and shrugs. “Put me down for two”, she bids. George scribbles that down on the pad and turns to me.

“I’m gonna nil”, I tell him, “unless I can use one of these clubs to mug your cards in a dark alley”.

We pitch cards into the center of the table and Noelle and George alternate raking in their tricks because they’re getting all the good cards tonight.

“Getting back to what we were talking about earlier”, George says, “...do you think some day you’ll want to get...” he makes cupping motions in front of his chest, “I mean, I don’t know, would you get those silicone implant things, or...”

“Hormones?”, Noelle contributes. “I know I heard about one guy who transitioned male to female, and he grew his own. Or rather, I guess *she* did.”

I shake my head. “It’s not like that. I mean, not for me. If it’s not wrong that I’m male but more like one of the girls, then I don’t need to fix it. This is part of what I mean, about communication being complicated. There are all these ideas that get tied together in people’s

heads. ‘Oh, so you’re a she person, I get it, you want to be female’. But that’s not what it’s about for me. Many women don’t accept being defined by their body, or at least not by somebody else’s idea of what having that body means. Well, I don’t either.”

“So is it like you’re more in between?”, Noelle suggests.

“No, I don’t think so. I mean, I don’t think being even more like women and girls, whatever that might consist of, would make me feel more like I’ve got to change my body.”

“We don’t mean any offense or anything”, George says. “I mean, whatever rocks your boat. I’m just trying to wrap my head around it is all.”

“Oh, I’m not offended, don’t worry. With Barnes, it’s like he’s looking for a weakness, something he can jump on and say ‘See, Derek, you’re maladjusted and confused and you don’t know what you want’. You’re not making me feel that way, you’re just curious and trying to understand, I get that. But this is what I mean about needing to get better at putting it in words.”

Noelle tosses a five of diamonds onto the table. “You might be worrying about it more than you need to. Kids are mean about stuff like that but I don’t think there’s that many people who care once they’re older and get out on their own. There’s all kinds of people in the world.”

\* \* \*

I do want to talk about the sissy stuff, the peculiar sense of identity that I’ve developed. Barnes wants me to go there, he’s been sniffing in that area more than once. I think he sees it as

an area where I'm not as confident as I sound, where he thinks he can evoke some defensiveness and push my buttons. Mark, too, he obviously sees any turning away from the whole being-a-man thing as an inherent weakness or insecurity, although he's mostly homophobic, and I don't think he knows what to make of me.

What I want is someone who will actually try to understand.

All this material is still hard for me to explain, and if I had people to talk to who were making an attempt to get it, that would be one thing. But I'm not in a hurry to put it all out there for people to try to poke holes in what I'm saying. I don't need more practice in being stubborn and arguing with authority figures, I'm already good at that. The honest place is more vulnerable and yet stronger at the same time, and I want to be in that space if I'm going to have this talk. George and Jake and Noelle and the other residents, they don't just take in whatever I say without some dubiety and yes they can be dismissive at times, but they're still more comfortable to talk with about it than any of the therapy staff.

I think at some point if these ideas are solid, I'm going to want to say "okay, bring it on", and deal with people being dismissive and laughing at me or whatever.

But I'm not sure I want to be poked yet. Even Noelle and George sometimes make me feel shy and vulnerable. I'm still figuring things out. I want to know if what makes sense to me can make sense to other people.

\* \* \*

“I look at that door you went out, every time I walk past it”, Jake tells me. “They make sure it’s pulled shut, I’ve never seen it that way again.”

“Yeah”, I nod, “I’m not surprised.”

“What do you think would be the best way to bust out, if you had to?”

“I don’t know. One possibility is the ceiling. They got that acoustic tile stuff everywhere, and if there’s a crawl space up above it, you might be able to get out beyond the doors from the entrance foyer, drop down out there and then right out the front door.”

“You actually look around thinking about it, huh?”

“Well, I tend to imagine scenarios, little ‘what if’ movies in my head. What’s a lot more likely is that I just tell them I’m tired of the game and want out, and they tell me not to let the door hit my ass and good riddance. Would definitely piss my parents off, no refunds and all that. But it might be coming to that.”

We enter the community group room together. Jake seeks out and locates April and they exchange glances. I take a seat.

People are still streaming in when Charlie storms in and barges over where I’m sitting and shoves me hard; I topple backwards. “You thought I wouldn’t notice? Just how stupid do you think I am?”

“Hey”, yells Gary, “what the hell’s going on?” There’s a mix of staff and residents holding Charlie back as I climb up from the floor.

“Yeah, seriously”, I add, “what are you talking about?”

“I leave my wallet on the bed for, like, ten minutes and this asshole slips in and takes thirty or forty dollars when I go into the bathroom”, he accuses, pointing at me.

“Derek”, Gary asks, “is that true?”

“No!”

“Charlie, why do you think it was Derek who took it? Did you see him?”

“It had to be him, nobody else would’ve seen that I left my wallet on the bed. And like you said, he goes places he don’t belong and thinks he’s better than everybody else. Oh yeah, it’s him, you can be sure!”

“Dude, he was with me in the hallway ten minutes ago”, Jake says.

Charlie glares at me. “Well then it was earlier, I don’t know.”

“I don’t even know how much money is in my wallet at the moment”, I say. “What would I do with it in here? Buy a lifetime supply of Coca-Cola from the soda machine?” I draw my billfold out of my back pocket.

Charlie huffs. “Well yeah sure, you hid it somewhere else.”

There’s fifty dollars in tens and twenties and a couple ones. I shrug.

Paradoxically, I think this helps convince a lot of the people standing around that I didn’t steal it.

Dr. Barnes has come in by now. “Charles, you can’t accuse people without evidence, and you absolutely can’t attack people physically.”

Gary adds, “You’re all ready to fight. You think that makes your ass right, but it don’t. You



don't necessarily know a damn thing. Now you need to apologize to Derek. If you're going to be a part of this community you've got to hang loose, dude. You aren't going to get another warning."

Charlie gives me an apology that's somewhat less convincing than the ones exchanged by Noelle and Tuyen earlier.

Dr. Barnes now adds, "Well, Derek, you need to take some responsibility for how your own behavior feeds into people's perceptions, even when they're erroneous. You heard Charles here say that your disregard for our community boundaries led him to that conclusion. Charles, do not seize upon this as a tacit wink of approval. I cannot run this institution with any tolerance for violence. If it happens one more time, with anybody, I can and will call the police. I hope I'm making myself clear."

I'm wondering how best to ask about changing to a different room when Dr. Barnes tells Charlie to switch beds with Ronald.

= July 31, 1982 (Day Thirteen) =

I get up before Ronald does, shower quietly, dress, and leave. Last night I'd been braced for an additional dose of hostility and dismissive contempt, but it didn't happen; so far, Ronald has been matter-of-fact about being switched to my room.

I sit by myself in the cafeteria, happy for a chance to read some in my book and sip my

coffee.

At the appointed time, I head down the corridor for AA group and take a seat. At five minutes after the hour, Gary says “Good morning. Let’s go ahead and get started.”

After introducing newcomers Tuyen and Javier, and having us go around the room with any pressing issues we feel a need to bring up, Gary puts the focus on me. “Derek, we seem to have gotten off on the wrong foot with you, but you’re using that as an excuse to tune us out. I’ve heard you say you know you have problems, but they aren’t alcohol problems. You know, in my book, that’s a lot like being a dry drunk. You may not be drinking out of the bottle, but what I’m seeing is a whole basketful of denial and bad patterns, and a refusal to take responsibility or accept help from the people offering it.”

Hmmph. Trying his hand at Dr. Barnes’ routine, trying to position himself as compassionately concerned instead of just going for the frontal attack. I try not to broadcast my exasperation. I reply, “I probably should not have said it that way. Let me explain...no, hold on Gary, you just explained what *you’re* seeing, so I’d like to explain what I see when I look in the mirror and try to give myself an honest personal inventory.”

“Okay, Derek.”

“I see a person with a combination of talents and attributes and personality characteristics, a set of impressive strengths and also a few prominent areas of weakness, but overall I like who this person is. In fact, overall I like *how* this person is, he’s actually not doing too bad. Now, I did come in here hoping to work on those areas of weakness, *if* improving in those areas doesn’t come at the expense of the parts of myself that I like. You know how some things can look like a

negative or a positive, depending on how you're looking at them at the moment? Like that joke about 'I'm firm, you're willful, he's stubborn'? A lot of the quirks and difficulties I have with connecting with people may be tradeoffs for being a very independent thinking person, and if I have to choose, I'll choose to cope with not connecting with people as successfully as I'd like. Does that make sense to you?"

Gary scowls and clasps his hands behind his head. "Since we all know you've read your medical chart, I'd like to point out that you've got problems a lot more serious than that to work on."

"Oh, the paranoid schizophrenia thing?" I do a quick glance around the room. "For the benefit of anyone who doesn't know, Dr. Barnes has given me a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia." I see Ronald blink, and Valerie drops her hands to her knees.

I recenter my gaze and voice on Gary again. "Like I said, I like who and how I am. If I'm a paranoid schizophrenic, then that's apparently the 'me' that I like, so it's a difference — I mean if I really actually *am* different in some fundamental way from the average person, then I'm atypical but that's a difference and not a problem. Who I am is only a problem if it's a problem for me. I mean, no offense, but I've called the rest of you in as my consultants but you don't get a vote. I know this is AA in here, but I think a *different* AA is more appropriate in this situation. Affirmative Action. I think maybe paranoid schizophrenics should have protections in hiring, like whatever percent we are in the population, you have to hire that percent of us, you can't discriminate against us. And schizophrenic pride marches too."

Gary's still scowling. "Schizophrenic pride march, huh? What would you do, link arms

with yourself and march down Main Street shouting ‘I’m schizophrenic, and so am I?’”

Behind Gary, George’s face bends towards Valerie’s; Amanda and Ronald glance at each other too. Gary was probably intending to be insulting — implying that I only have a cartoon level understanding of schizophrenia — but it’s not funny or appropriate, and no one acts as if it is. A lot of people just broke eye contact with Gary long enough to check in with their neighbor, as if to verify that yeah, he said that. Gary’s problem is that quite aside from whether or not I’m making sense to him, I manage to make sense to other people in this environment. Not always, but often enough.

I know it’s not at all comfortable for the other residents to express themselves in agreement with me when I’m in open disagreement with staff, especially not right there in their immediate presence. But right now he’s on the receiving end of a roomful of ‘Gary, what the fuck’ facial expressions.

\* \* \*

In the cafeteria, card players are involved in a game in progress; I go over and hang out on the fringes.

April and Tuyen are in conversation. April is saying, “... strikes me as the kind who thinks someone insinuating she’s racist is *much* worse than any actual racism might be, you know?”

“Yeah, like *that’s* unusual!”, Tuyen smirks. “People are like ‘Ooh, I’m totally against racism, tell me how I can help’, and you go ‘Well, okay, you might want to look at this’, and then they’re

all, ‘Hey, you just accused me of being racist, how dare you!’.” She huffs. “I never called that bitch a racist.”

I don’t butt into the conversation, but I’m thinking it’s complicated, because you *want* the accusation of racism to have some bite to it, it *should* be something that nobody wants to be. So it shouldn’t be flicked around too lightly. But Tuyen’s obviously right, getting someone to look at their behavior or their participation in something they’ve maybe never thought about isn’t the same as saying they’re a racist.

I think part of the problem is we don’t have enough words. In feminist thought, you can say someone is a sexist pig and you can also and separately say that somebody is a participant in the patriarchal structure and should look at how. Examine our own role in the ongoing framework, you know? *Sexism* is an attitude, a shitty belief system that reinforces the unfairnesses; *patriarchy* is the institution and it’s almost impossible for any of us not to be caught up in participating in it in at least some ways. That may be an oversimplified way for me to divide it up, but it really helps to have two words. For race we just have the one word, really, and for most of us white people, who aren’t the target of institutional racism, we first learned that *racist* meant having the shitty biased attitudes and beliefs. I guess it’s easy for us to be oblivious to the systemic stuff and to go around thinking if we’re personally nice and fair to nonwhite people, hey we’ve done our part.

“Hey Derek”, April greets me when conversation lulls. “So how’s it going? Is Ronald a tradeup from Charlie?”

“He is, actually. I mean, so far it’s more comfortable. Even though both of them have this

belief that I think I'm better than them and all snobby about it. That's not it. I just think I'm *different* from them."

I think about Ronald and Charlie for a couple moments, then add, "They both got this attitude going on that I've seen before, where someone who's been through a lot of rough times thinks they're so *experienced* that anyone who doesn't think and act like them, they say 'You don't know nothin', you ain't been there and I have'. But I don't see any sign of them having learned anything interesting from their experiences."

April grins, closing both eyes momentarily and nodding.

So I elaborate, "I can't help picturing them like characters in a comic book, like I view this old sailor, imagine Popeye the sailor man, but older and really beaten up and toothless, and he's telling you 'Aaah, I been jailed in Calcutta and beaten every day with hickory limbs, and climbed through miles of razor wire, attacked in alleys with broken bottles and got my nose hacked clean off, I drank methyl spirits off sterno and they had to cut out half my stomach, got my arm infected from dirty needles, got shot in the back once and left dyin' of thirst, crawled through cockroach shit to the swamp and halfway drowned and then got malaria and they had to chop my foot off cuz of gangrene. *You ain't been* through all that, so *you don't know shit!*'", I growl, playing the role.

"But then, you know...", I continue in my own voice, "they also act like the only real understandings to be had are these real basic simple things, like everything is as plain as day and totally obvious, and if that's so, they should've known everything by the time they were six years old and not had to go through all that shit to learn it."

I realize I'm trying hard to be witty and funny and otherwise impressive.

\* \* \*

I slip into my room to brush my hair. Ronald isn't in. Must have already headed off to psychodrama or not gotten back from recreation, so I have a moment of alone-time. I stare up at the acoustic tiles and how close the top of my dresser would bring me to them, and I get curious. I'll just poke my head around up there to see what it looks like.

I move a few cluttered things from the top surface of my dresser — my boarding pass, still in the airline envelope; a handful of small change; last week's Elk Meadows schedule; a couple of Bic pens. I pull out an upper drawer just a couple inches, enough to brace a foot against it and treat it like a stair, and then I lean forward and ascend.

I raise one ceiling tile and slide it over to the side and stand up within the square. Amazingly, it isn't all dark up here: light from the various fluorescent ceiling fixtures filters in around the edges of the metal parts that hold them. There are flimsy aluminum ribs making a lattice but also much firmer beams. More advance reconnaissance would seem to recommend itself. I grasp the nearest of the big beams and hoist myself, crawling and twisting until my legs are up, then I carefully replace the tile I came through.

Hmm. How am I going to recognize which tile I came up through in order to come back to it if I move away from this spot? The upper surfaces of the tiles have a layer of dust; I draw a big

X on the one I came through and move down the beam a bit. Yes, I can see it. As long as I know how to return to this particular beam, I should be able to find the X.

The dresser was positioned right up against the bedroom wall. So after I've traveled a couple dozen feet, I figure I'm clearly above the hallway. I'm a phantom, moving through walls. I take a left at the next intersecting beam, marking an L shape in the dust of the adjoining tile to indicate that this was where I made a turn.

The question, of course, is whether a person could navigate out beyond the locked door perimeter they keep us in. The problem is that I've always been one of those people who go into department stores and immediately lose any awareness of the layout of the store. I'm retaining a mental map of my progress *up here*, because I'm concentrating on it, doing it deliberately; meanwhile, all this time when I've been down there roaming the hallways, I've been on autopilot and only relying on a vague sense of distances and recognizing visually where to go next. So I don't have all that good a map in my head for where it is that I should go, at least not without landmarks to tell me where I am. I creep along.

I hear group conversations going on below me. I'm not above a hallway here. Cafeteria? Conference room. I move more slowly and carefully. Then for awhile I'm above an apparently empty space of some sort. Now more voices, chairs scraping.

I bump something and a cloud of dust flies into my face. I'm trying to deal with the dust burning my eye when the sneeze comes. It's a pretty explosive sneeze, unfortunately.

"Hey", says a male voice, "did you hear that? It sounded like someone just sneezed!"

"Yeah? I heard some creaking a moment ago but I thought it was the pipes. You think



someone's up there?"

It hadn't occurred to me that anyone would suspect. Hear something, maybe, but not that they'd figure it out. *Shit!*

I crouch as still as possible but whatever's going on below me doesn't seem to be adjourning, and I can't maintain this posture forever. After five minutes or so, I try to stretch out to a more comfortable arrangement but it makes more creaks and groans.

"There it is again!"

In a matter of moments, people are standing on chairs and lifting tiles aside so they can look, and there I am.

It's the psychodrama lab. Marie's holding a running video camera. Great. Film at eleven.

"Derek?", Jeremy says, "umm, what are you doing in the ceiling?"

They help me down. I feel utterly ridiculous. Damn my ego and my sense of mischief. Just couldn't resist the possibility that I could leave for good without needing their consent. Prove I'm the one in control of the process. So clever I can get out any damn time I want to.

"What if you'd slipped and fell while you were up there?", Jeremy asks. "You'd go right through these tiles and land on your face. And there could be electric wires, and red-hot water pipes..."

"You couldn't pay me to go up there", Marie adds. "There could be rats, and roaches..."

"Yeah, and poison put up there to kill them..."

"...breathing all that dust, and getting that insulation stuff into your lungs... what were you thinking?"

“I was still feeling a little weird about the thing with Charlie and I just wanted to be entirely alone for a little while”, I tell them. “Stupid idea.”

That last bit, at least, is honest and pretty much spot on.

\* \* \*

“Well, it appears that Derek has discovered a new form of therapy”, Dr. Barnes tells the large group. “Perhaps you’d care to tell us about it?”

I’m blushing and definitely flustered. “That was exceptionally bad judgment”, I tell the room. “I was all immersed in how I was feeling and I didn’t stop to think how my actions would affect the hospital or other people in the community here. It was selfish, and self-absorbed. I’m sorry. I’m embarrassed and I really don’t have any excuse for it.”

“We all exercise bad judgment in our lives”, Barnes replies. “What’s important is getting to the point that we can recognize that in ourselves, instead of hiding behind our defenses and refusing to acknowledge our self-destructive behavior.”

At the moment he’s got that. Amazingly, now that a situation has arisen that’s positioned me where he wants me, he isn’t inflicting additional verbal slices. Aside from trying to generalize from this event to the larger pattern of my behavior, he doesn’t do anything to humiliate me. He doesn’t even go into any details.

I don’t think we’ll ever see eye to eye; he probably earnestly believes everyone who comes here needs to reach the point of seeing themselves in a harshly critical light, and to internalize a

new view of themselves as makers of bad choices — as people who keep doing self-destructive things over and over. He probably sees that as a necessary first step towards breaking bad patterns. But maybe he's really trying to help people as best as he knows how, and this is the therapeutic approach he's found works with a lot of the people who come here.

\* \* \*

Noelle says she needs to swing by the nurses' station before we start another round of cards. George and I tag along.

Vicky the charge nurse is visible through the plexiglass window in the supplies room in back, apparently rummaging through a box of manila folders. She glances up but doesn't come out right away, and after a couple moments Noelle calls out, "Hi! When you got a sec..."

The nurse puts a few additional supplies onto the shelf, then snags a folder that looks like someone's chart record. Comes up to the counter. Noelle asks, "Hey, can I go ahead and get my muscle relaxer? I need to take it a few hours before bedtime or I get twitches and it wakes me up."

Nurse Vicky responds, "Next time try to get on the medication line after supper. It's really not convenient to drop whatever we're doing and tend to you whenever you decide to stop by." Noelle's eyes roll but she keeps an otherwise neutral face.

Vicky checks Noelle's chart, takes a green-barreled ballpoint from her shirt pocket and makes a note, and then goes in back to the medication closet, returning with a shallow paper cup.

“Okay, if you’re used to Lioresal, this this may not look like your regular tablet, but it’s the same medicine.”

“Yeah, generic baclofen, I’m used to that.” Noelle reaches for the medicine cup.

“Now be careful if you get up in the middle of the night to pee or something, because this can make you drowsy and it can affect your balance.”

“I know, I’ve been on it, so I know the drill. Thanks.”

Vicky hands her the medicine. Noelle turns and George and I follow down the corridor.

Once we’re out of earshot, Noelle says, “Bossy ass bitch.” George laughs.

“She definitely seems to have an attitude problem, but she seems to know her stuff and she explained it to you”, I say. “She’s supposed to do that as a nurse, it’s part of the job.”

= August 1, 1982 (Day Fourteen) =

Morning unit meeting is a bit more confrontational. Even many of the residents I thought were fundamentally supportive of my attitude, like Jake and Noelle and Valerie, seem to expect me to view yesterday’s excursion into the ceiling as a life-altering event.

I don’t.

“Look,” I reexplain yet again, “as Dr. Barnes himself said, we all make errors of judgment sometimes. If everyone who did something completely stupid and poorly thought out is messed up and needs a mental adjustment, everyone would end up in rehab and there’d be nobody left to do anything else. Sometimes, yeah, one mistake can be so costly it’s going to mess up your life.

Or other people's lives. And, sure, sometimes a person can be in a pattern or on a trajectory where they keep making pretty bad judgment errors over and over again. All I did was embarrass myself. I don't see myself as having a history of doing that repeatedly, I may not behave like you do but I have a sense of dignity I aspire to. I can live with the consequences and learn from it and move on."

"I don't know", Valerie says. "It's pretty weird, climbing up into the ceiling. You think that's normal?"

I don't. But in and of itself I don't see that as a problem. "I wish I hadn't done it, but no damage was done. Not to any people. If Elk Meadow decides I've done damages, they can sue me or bill me. Or maybe this kind of thing is covered by their insurance, I don't really know."

\* \* \*

After lunch, Ronald approaches me as I'm putting my plate and silverware into the grey plastic dirty-dishes bin and tossing my napkin into the trash. "Hey. So I don't know if you heard. Charlie got booted out of the program."

"No, I *hadn't* heard. For attacking me, or did he do something else?"

Ronald stares at me, leans in a little closer. "He thought you stole money from his wallet. Be a shame if he got dropped for going after you and it turns out it was true." Not quite a glare, but I'm feeling evaluated. "He loses his shot at getting his shit together. Did you?"

"No", I answer. I appreciate him asking outright and not just continuing with the

implications. “I’m not a thief. I never touched his stuff.”

“Yeah. Okay”, Ronald says. He nods slowly, seems to accept it. “I don’t know if it *was* just that, they don’t really tell us nothin’, just, you know, ‘he’s out of here’. If it was...he really fucked himself then. What a waste.”

Ronald dumps his own dishes in the bin and walks off down the hall.

\* \* \*

No one here at Elk Meadow has ever seen me dance. I’m ungainly at it, with too much bounce in my step so I boing around like I’m on springs whenever I try. I’m graceful in some other forms of motion but I hardly ever dance unless prompted. So it’s the perfect metaphor; everyone will know that dancing is not the behavior I’m really talking about. And they’ll get it.

Psychodrama group. Everyone’s happy to see me opt for the hot seat. I draft Jake, Noelle and Valerie to be participants.

“Your goal,” I tell them, “is to try to get me to stop dancing. You should try to convince me. You can use logical arguments and you should use peer pressure. Also, you can offer me benefits if I’ll stop, or set up advantages for stopping, or take them away if I won’t.”

I nod to Jeremy and he starts the video camera. I begin shuffling and twisting and moving my arms.

“You shouldn’t do that”, Noelle tells me. “Dancing is... dancing is bad for you.”

I say, “Never done me any damage.”

“C’mon, man,” Jake urges. “No one else is dancing. Must be a reason for that, don’tcha think?”

Valerie has been staring at me. She shakes her head, disapprovingly. Says to Noelle, “We shouldn’t associate with him. If he’s going to be that way...”

Noelle turns back to Valerie and says, “I don’t think we should invite him to the party after all, do you?”

Marie says, “Direct more of what you’re saying to Derek. Make him respond.”

Valerie says, “You can’t come to our party. You’d probably try to dance there. We don’t want dancing, because it’s a party!”

Jake adds, “We were going to all hang out on the beach and meet some...lots of cute people we told about you. If you’ll quit dancing, you can still come, okay?”

I say, “I understand, I mean it’s your party and all, but I like to dance, so what’s wrong with it?”

Noelle replies, “Well, you’ll never get anywhere. No one will ever hire you, or go out with you...”

Jake chimes in, “...or rent an apartment to you, we don’t like your kind, what if the children saw you dancing?”

Valerie adds, “We’re talking about years and years. Your life won’t get better until you quit dancing!”

I nod, “That may be, but they’ll still be dancing years!”, and I twirl and shimmy.

Marie signals Jeremy to pause recording. “Okay, that was really good! Derek, is that how it feels? Do you like it so far? All right, here’s what I think: you should switch roles. Let’s see, who should be you? Valerie, you be Derek. And Derek, you join the others and explain why she shouldn’t dance.”

Valerie and I switch locations; I’m standing with Jake and Noelle.

“You just want to control me”, Valerie-me says. “There’s nothing wrong with what I’m doing.”

I jump in. “Dancing is disruptive in some contexts. Can you agree on that much? Can you imagine trying to teach fourth grade if everyone’s out of their seats dancing?”

Valerie pouts. “This isn’t fourth grade.” She keeps dancing. She actually looks very cute in those jeans, dancing the way she’s doing now. She’s much better at it than I am.

“That ain’t the point”, Jake says, following my lead. “You don’t get to shout ‘fire’ in a crowded theater, right? So sometimes you need to recognize even if dancing isn’t wrong all the time, it isn’t all right all the time either.”

“Exactly”, I say. “It’s a social contract. You get to dance but you can’t bring dancing into places where it would be disruptive. And you’re insisting you get to dance no matter what, that’s very unfair to the rest of us.”

“Oh, this is good”, Marie says. “Keep going!”

“You have to show that I went and danced somewhere and disrupted anything”, Valerie argues. “And you can’t!”

“Okay, here’s the thing”, I say. “Excuse me, but it is now necessary for you to go into a



place where it happens to be disruptive if anyone was dancing there. I mean, we've got a no-dancing rule because we've determined that dancing is disruptive. And it's necessary for you to be here."

Jeremy and Marie whisper-conference for a moment, then Marie says, "This might be a good time to switch again." I take my original position and Valerie is back with Jake and Noelle.

"Where do you want us to start?", Valerie asks.

"Jeremy, play back the last exchange", Marie instructs. He does. Marie makes a chopping motion after my voice on the videotape informs Valerie-me that it's now necessary to go somewhere that dancing would be disruptive. Jeremy halts the tape.

"Derek, how about you reply to that as the one who's going to be in that situation", Marie tells me.

"If I have to be in such a place", I say, "because it's necessary for some reason, then I think I get to question the social contract rules, because if the rules aren't *necessary* and it really *isn't* all that disruptive, then it feels like the rules are being used as an excuse to keep me from dancing. Like saying you have the freedom to wear a t-shirt with a slogan on it in the privacy of your home but you don't get to go outdoors in public with it because if anyone saw you wearing it, it would be disruptive. I mean, if it's a place I can just avoid, that's maybe different, but if it's *necessary* for me to go there, then it's also necessary that I get to challenge the no-dancing rule."

"Maybe you get to challenge it", Noelle argues, "but you don't get to decide that for everybody, and we don't agree. We think it's a good rule and you're the only one who wants to dance so you're outvoted."

“That’s a very good point. I have to pitch my idea, sell you on the notion that it should be okay to dance there after all. That means I need to have an official way to pitch my idea to the community where you don’t just ignore me. But first I want to ask about something else. Is it *me* who decided that it’s necessary for me to go to this place where I’m not supposed to dance, or is it being required of me, so I don’t have a choice in the matter?”

Marie whispers into Valerie’s ear. Valerie nods, then says, “You chose. But now you’re here.”

I nod. That does kind of summarize the situation. I say, “I’d like to request we switch roles again. I want to give you a sense of how things feel to me, if I can.” Marie nods; we switch again.

“Okay, ‘Derek’”, I begin, “to review, we have a social contract. You chose to come here and there are rules. No dancing. One other thing though, now that you’re here, you should know, it’s always necessary for you to be here. You get to dance when you’re not here in this space, but this is actually the only space you get to be in. There are always technically choices, like when you decide to hand the robber your wallet because the robber has a gun, you could have decided not to do that, so it’s still a choice. But if you decided something different, you’d get shot. So, hey, you decided to do what you had to do, and that means you went somewhere where you can’t dance.”

“Wait, no”, Valerie-me protests. “That means you’re just pretending I can dance, but really I never get to dance. That’s really unfair, man, and I don’t have to put up with it.”

“You seem unhappy because you can’t dance”, I tell her. “We don’t want you to be unhappy,

so what we're going to do is adjust some things inside your head, we know how to do that. After that, you won't *want* to dance any more, and that will fix everything. Won't that be nice?"

That silences the room for a satisfying couple seconds; people are barely moving and breathing at all.

Then Jeremy waves Marie over, says something very brief, she nods.

"Derek, if you don't mind, we want you to trade places one more time, because we really want to hear you *say* how it feels and how you want to respond to that."

Jeremy plays back the last bit from the tape. I take a deep breath. "It is really scary and totally unfair. I'm not going to voluntarily stop dancing. But I feel very threatened by all these attempts to change me without my consent. It's a nightmare. You need to stop. You don't get to do this to people." Today's drama has become vivid and real. Maybe too real. My heart is pounding and my voice is warbling. But I'm definitely communicating. I've got everyone's focused attention right now.

We've gone past the psychodrama session time frame and so there isn't much time for review and discussion. I'm happy with how it went, though.

I end up in the vicinity of Jake in the throng of people exiting to the hallway. I say, in a lowered tone, "So do I maybe seem a little less out of my gourd, now, or are you still worried that my brain cells have started misfiring?"

"What the fuck was I supposed to say? 'Hey everybody, Derek isn't crazy, he was just trying to escape again'? I sort of figured you didn't want to put that out there, dude."

He has a very good point. So much of a good point I should not have needed to have that point so pointedly pointed out to me. I've been off balance.

Getting caught scrambling around in the ceiling has really made me aware that I'm not as immune to how I look to other people as I like to think. It's weird. I don't seem to mind them thinking a wide range of hostile negative things about me, but there's something oversensitive in that zone that has to do with looking pathetically inept... no, that's not quite it... I should think about this more. The ceiling debacle really... hmm, come to think of it, I don't think it has much to do with how I looked to *other people*, it's how I looked *to myself* in that moment. I did something spontaneous and with no particular plan, which I get away with a lot, but not this time. This time I ended up looking incompetent and immature.

I remember once from when I was nine when our phenomenal kitty cat Mister Katzen came traipsing into the bathroom when I was taking a bath, and walked along the perimeter of the tub inspecting. He slipped and fell into the water and scrambled back out. He looked thoroughly humiliated and I giggled which probably didn't help much. I think maybe my reaction to being caught in the ceiling is sort of like that. I embarrassed myself in front of myself. It was a violation of my sense of dignity, like I said before. Having others react as they have just added some extra icing to the cake, that's all. It's been embarrassing. Doesn't go away immediately even when you understand it as it's happening.

Flouncy Derek. I guess I'm always on the verge of caring too much what I think of me. I'm self-immersed and vain, especially, you know, in that 'I do as I please' mode, being arrogant in my confidence. Tossing my hair and being formidable. There's a tiny portion of me that tends to

find myself amusingly and pompously self-important, and thinks I take myself more than a bit too seriously. That critical self-mocking part's there, all right... but it's definitely a smaller part than the pompous segment. Maybe do me some good to feel ridiculous and nurture a sense of humor. Pretentious Derek crawling around in the damn ceiling gets his comeuppance. Now we have Flouncy Derek in wet cat mode.

Anyway, Jake is right. If it wasn't quite an attempt to get out, it was at least a probe to see if it was a feasible way to go at it. And, true, I guess I'd rather the staff not chart it as some kind of failed escape attempt.

\* \* \*

"You are", Mark asserts, "without a doubt the *stubbornest* person I ever met. You *know* what you need to do to walk out of this place. Why don't you just *do* it?"

Well, I gather he, at any rate, has worked it out that I was either trying to escape or scope out the building's ceiling to see if escape were feasible. I find myself smiling a wry sort of smile, because I've been asking myself the same question.

"Just use some common sense! You're very intelligent, and you know it. You can use that to be clever, or you can use it to be *smart*."

Mark rests his hands on his knees and leans forward in his chair. He has a lot of body-language mannerisms that seem designed to suggest he's plain and approachable and someone you can trust. I think he means it, he really wants to be that person. That hasn't happened. We

always argue, and I rarely feel like he's listening to me in a way that counts. Still, I should probably cut him some slack for trying.

Mark puts some papers in his briefcase, locks it and rises. "Clever or smart", he reiterates. "I have to tell you...I don't have a whole lot of use for clever."

\* \* \*

The J. Geils band's "Centerfold" accompanies me as I walk towards our unit's nurses' station, having decided on a course of action. Mark is right. Screw this shit.

But as I pass the cafeteria, some of the other residents are hanging out. Ellen, April and Jake are at one table, occupying a row of chairs. Valerie and Ronald are at the next table, Valerie with her chair turned so she can face the others. On a whim, I go over to join them. One last confirmation.

"Can I ask you folks for some simple feedback?", I ask as I approach. "Sort of a straight up or down vote on an idea, something you've probably all heard me talk about at some point."

They seem to be really listening. "I have this notion of us forming a sort of patient's union, where we back each other up on our right to have more say-so about the therapy we receive. I guess it's no secret that I feel like Elk Meadow keeps trying to steer me without my permission, right? But you don't have to feel that way to want more involvement in the planning of your therapy. Setting the goals and having more say about how well you're making progress towards them. Do you think it's a good idea, overall?"

Ellen shakes her head. "It's good to think about, but I don't think it's realistic when we're still pretty messed up."

Jake says, "Barnes and his people, you know, they're either going to work on our therapy stuff and be all happy that we're getting with the program, or else they're working on us being noncooperative and resistant. There's no way they're pitching in to help on whatever some rabble rousing patients want the therapy to be about. Best you'd get is they sit back to watch you fail and make the rest of us laugh at you. They come after any of us for backsliding and bad attitude and all that, if we went with what you were doing."

Valerie comments, "This is like a continuation of what you were doing in psychodrama?"

"Yeah, basically."

"This is still you", Ronald tells me, "still thinking you're going to do something fancy and be a bigshot instead of doing the work you need to do on yourself. You won't never change, but nobody's following along behind you."

April says, "I like the idea, but Ellen and Jake are right, it's a lot of work that we don't have the extra energy for, plus, yeah, they'll be against it. Except maybe Jeremy and Marie." Jake, Noelle and Valerie all nod.

"Yeah", I say, "those two are the best part of this place's staff..." I glance from face to face one more time. "Well, thanks, that confirms some stuff for me. Best of luck, y'all."

I nod to them and rise.

They look back at me somewhat blankly, but I decide not to say any more. I resume my progress towards the nurse's station. Yeah, stick with the plan. And don't look back, it just

makes everything more difficult.

\* \* \*

Nurse Vicky is in charge this shift. I wish Penelope were on instead, since Vicky and I have a problematic history because of the chart thing, but I take a deep breath and step closer.

“Yes? What can I do for you?”, she asks.

“Hi. I’d like to be discharged.”

The nurse looks back, all detached and starchy professionalism despite the lack of uniform.

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“I’ve decided, after thinking about it for a long time, that I’m not getting any benefit out of being here, and so I’d like to sign out and leave the facility for good.”

“Oh! I see... well, you can’t just tell us you’re leaving and go out the door. I think you should take this up with your case manager tomorrow morning.”

“Well, maybe. I’m not saying I know the rules better than you do. But Dr. Barnes told us we could leave ‘any time’. Is there someone you could ask? I’d really rather not wait until tomorrow, if that’s possible.”

Vicky Armstead, RN, looks back at me. At the person who just a few days ago barged past her and locked himself in her bathroom to read his chart. “Hold on”, she tells me, then picks up the telephone handset. She pushes a sequence of buttons, then returns the receiver to the cradle. “He should call back if he’s still on the floor. He usually is.”



Phone rings. She picks it up, speaks quietly into it. "...have a resident here at the desk... your attention, if you could...okay."

It doesn't take long. Dr. Barnes comes ambling down the corridor, waves. "Good evening, Derek. What's going on?" Casual, almost bored. Heavy-lidded eyes, blank face with a mild trace of curiosity around the edges.

"I'd like to go ahead and be discharged. I've given it a lot of thought and I just don't think Elk Meadow and me are a good match. You always said if we don't like it here we're welcome to leave any time we want to."

"So... mm, I see. At eight PM out of nowhere you decide you want to leave the facility without discussing it with your care team. Where would you go? We open the doors and you step out... then what? Have you given that any thought?" He gives an urbane shrug.

"Oh, I have. But that would no longer be your concern. I'm an adult. I'm used to that kind of situation, and I do have places I can go." I lift the palms of my hand, a reciprocal shrug.

"It's already getting dark. It will be night soon. We don't exactly have a curfew here, but the people in these suburbs get worried when strangers are walking around in their neighborhood after dark, and the Houston police can be protective of them."

"I understand. I'm used to coping with that kind of thing. I'm pretty sure I know the way into Houston proper, and I'll have my ID with me." I smile and act decorously, everything is fine.

"So you're demanding that we just open the doors and out you go, and that's it, huh?"

"Well, I'm not telling you what the rules of your institution are. I'm ready to sign or get

processed for release, however you do that kind of thing, and if you say this has to wait until tomorrow, I'll accept that, we can pick this up in the morning...but you kept telling us, you said anyone who doesn't like it here can leave at any time. And if that's really the way it is, honestly I'd rather go ahead and leave now."

Dr. Barnes strokes his chin for a moment, then nods. "Okay, let's go into the back so we won't be underfoot for the nurses." He gestures to a small conference room inside the nurse's station area, and I follow him. "Have a seat", he says, "I'll have them bring the paperwork." He crosses back to the front desk and places a phone call.

Why the hell didn't I do this sooner? Mark said it best. I've always known I could just say "I'm done, I'm leaving", simple as that, so why did I waste so much time playing games with them here?

I slide into the waiting chair. I don't need to wait long.

I hear the sound of personnel arriving, exchanging murmured greetings, so I turn to face the door expectantly, anticipating statements of release of any institutional liability, and please check here to indicate that yes I understand I won't get my money back, and other such processing forms.

Four men enter, carrying a canvas stretcher. Another is holding a straitjacket, with the buckles dangling, and, bringing up the rear, a sixth orderly is holding a loaded hypodermic syringe.

\* \* \*

“...sequence of inappropriate behavior, sudden decision, unsafe hour...”, Dr. Barnes is talking but I’m not paying much attention. I’m focused on watching the orderlies; will they grab me? Inject me? Tackle me to the floor?

“Get on the gurney”, one of them, guy with jowly cheeks, says, pointing to the stretcher.

“I... I don’t know my rights”, I say, my voice shaking badly. “I don’t want to, but I won’t fight back or struggle if you put me there. But I’m not going to get on voluntarily. This isn’t what I want.”

My body wants to tense up. I think that would be a bad idea. This is where they would most likely jump me, I just said no to something I was told to do. I don’t want to give them any additional excuse.

I luck out. Three of the crew move to me and grab me firmly, but lift me in a smooth motion directly to the stretcher. No violence, but they’re moving me quickly. I’m placed face down, then they tie my arms and my legs down. I’m still on screaming-high alert, my pulse banging like crazy, anticipating the needle, but they don’t do that either. The stretcher is lifted and I’m carried out into the hall.

I can see feet, I get the impression of people coming out to watch the disturbance. I can’t interact, don’t know who any of them are, who is seeing this, who knows.

Around a corner, down another hallway. Personnel coming out of a doorway. Murmured updates to them from the ones carrying me. Click of an electric door lock, and I’m carried within. Another door being unlocked. Onto a bed. The orderly to the left of my head remains;

the others depart.

“I’m going to release your restraints. Keep still until I tell you you can move”, the remaining man says. I can nod, so I do, small motion. The bonds on my extremities are loosened and removed; I stay in position, face down. “Okay, you can sit up.”

I do. The orderly is the same stocky guy who ordered me to get onto the stretcher. I’m in a small room with a bed and two chairs.

“Stand up over there”, he points. I do, and he picks up the stretcher, collapses it, and leaves with it. I hear the outside door close with a definitive snap.

The inside door is still open, and a person in nurse’s uniform comes in. Tall, attractively sturdy, wearing silver-rimmed eyeglasses. “Hello. I’m Theresa Perry, and I will be staying with you here for the next few hours.”

“Hi. Hi Theresa. I’m Derek Turner and... where is ‘here’?”

“This is a seclusion room. You’re at Elk Meadow Clinical Retreat.”

“Why am I in seclusion? What are they saying that I did? All I did was ask to leave!”

“You’ve been placed in seclusion while the facility decides on your status. I’m sorry, I don’t know any details beyond that, really. I was called in special for this shift.”

I nod. I look around gradually. There’s a clock on the wall. It’s 9:15 now. The walls are painted yellow. There’s a separate room with a sink and toilet to my left. There’s an open heavy-duty metal door to my right and beyond it, it looks like that’s the corner of a desk. One of those little chalkboards on the opposite wall, and on it someone has written ‘Turner’. And

another of those reinforced metal doors, this one closed. I think that's where they brought me in, through that door. All that walking around and I've never noticed a metal door like that. I bet it's on the other side of one of those wooden hallway doors that's usually closed. Some of them are always locked.

"I need to take your vital signs, okay?", Theresa informs me. I nod again, accept the thermometer into my mouth, give her my wrist to take pulse.

She finishes and jots down the values.

"You can have water, coffee, or tea. And I can get you a snack, if you want. Apple slices, or jello."

"Coffee would be nice, thanks."

"Cream, or sugar, or black?"

"Just plain black. Thank you. I appreciate it."

"Okay. I need to close this door. I won't be far and I won't be gone long."

I nod. She goes out the open door and closes it. After a couple minutes, I hear the key in the door and she enters with two coffees. She hands me mine and sets her own on a small table that appears to be a part of the chair she sits in.

"If you want to talk", she says, "I'm here and listening is part of my job. I may not be able to answer all your questions but we can talk if that would make you more comfortable."

"I might want to", I decide, "but maybe later. Unless you're supposed to ask me questions."

Theresa shakes her head. "If you don't mind, then, I brought a book to read." She takes a paperback from her purse. *The Hotel New Hampshire*. She flips to where she has a page dog-

eared.

\* \* \*

My incarceration at Mountain View Hospital was two years ago, in 1980. That was supposedly voluntary as well, although at the time I signed, I didn't know what I was signing. The people at the UNM medical clinic had asked if I were willing to talk to "the doctor." Then they had brought out a form for my signature. It didn't say anything on the form about me relinquishing my authority to make my own decisions, or about agreeing that I could be kept locked up for my own good. My impression at the time was that it was like the kind of release you sign for a medical procedure, yes I agree that the dermatologist will use a knife to excise this lesion and I understand the risks of scarring — that sort of thing. And I remember being amused that psychiatrists think a conversation between them and a patient should require a signed release. Yes, I consent to having this conversation.

That got creepy in a hurry. I was expecting maybe to have to deal with some intrusive questions. Insinuations that I had emotional hot buttons and things I hid from myself, that kind of thing. But instead they immediately demanded I take off my shoelaces and my belt. I didn't like being treated like it had already been decided that I did indeed have head problems, and I kept behaving like, no, I'm here to be checked out, get a clean bill of health and go back to my dorms, I'm not staying here. Then they jumped me, took those items from me, and when I objected they wrestled me down and shot me up with Thorazine and threw me in seclusion, a

quick and very intentional lesson in authority and power.

I can't believe I'm in a seclusion room again! And I can't believe I'm here because I signed a stupid piece of paper again, agreed to be in this damn place. 'Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me'. Clichés persist for a reason. If I get out of this mess, I will *never* consent to any form of psychiatric or related treatment, ever again.

Yeah, if I ever get out of here. Now how the fuck am I going to get out? What's going to happen to me now?

I catch Theresa's eye as she turns a page. She waits receptively, the book now lowered.

"I'm scared", I confess. "I'm dealing with it so far, but I'm really scared. I didn't do anything to justify this. I didn't attack anyone, I wasn't violent, I didn't yell, I'm not suicidal or trying to do anything dangerous. I just asked if I could leave. It's not fair to call this a voluntary program and then they can lock you up and do anything they want. And I don't like not knowing what's next."

"Yes, I can see where that would be very frightening. First because it must seem very unreasonable to you for this to be happening, and second because of not knowing what's going to happen next, like you said." She folds a corner of the book she was reading and tucks it back into her purse. "I don't know anything about your case history, or what happened to cause you to be here in seclusion. I can tell you this, though. Your situation would be scary to anyone. It would scare me. It would be scary even for someone who did something to make it appropriate for them to be put here. Maybe more so, I figure, if you didn't. But you're handling it well. Hold onto that. Where things unravel for people and they really lose control of the situation is

when they can't handle what's happening to them. You come across as a rational person. That won't always protect you in a situation like this but *not* coming across as a rational person definitely won't help."

"Thank you. That means a lot."

There's a pause while I gather my thoughts. Theresa doesn't pull her book out yet, just waiting.

"There's sort of a lifetime pattern", I begin. "I'm never a violent person, or temperamental and, you know, throwing things, anything like that. I think I nearly always come across nowadays as someone who is calm and sure of myself and doing what I want to be doing, but for as long as I can remember, I've been seen by other people as strange. And some people, for them that's been as far as it goes, just, you know, 'Derek is weird', no big deal. But other people get angry, or think there's really something wrong with me. And I've spent all my life trying to figure out what that's all about."

"That sounds very frustrating."

"At least most of my life. By third grade, a lot of other kids were starting to act like I was strange and different. I did this thing, when I was in third grade, it was very important to me at the time, a big deal, I was proud of it. Boys got into fights all the time on the playground, at recess, and after lunch and so on. And it was part of how everyone said boys and girls were different. But it was also something they always said about how us *kids*, you know, had to be watched and controlled because we were too immature to behave on our own. I wanted to be the equal of adults. Or at least not treated like I was automatically inferior. I knew there was stuff I



didn't know yet, but I was tired of being treated like we were all dumb and wild and needed spankings and punishments. It seemed to me the girls got more respect. Or maybe that's the wrong word. But there was at least an expectation that they did *not* need to be watched and controlled so carefully, because they were more mature and behaved themselves. If a teacher had to go out of the room, she'd ask a girl to take the names of anyone who misbehaved. They were expected to be more like adults already.

So...I went completely nonviolent in third grade. If some boy tried to start a fight, I just wouldn't, I'd ignore him and not fight back."

"But what if they were actually hitting you, though, doesn't that hurt? Don't you have to fight back?"

"You'd think so, wouldn't you? But... it was weird... we're talking eight year olds here, and... what I remember was that the boys had all these rules, all these really ritualized ways of how to be in a fight with another boy. Let's see... usually there's all this verbal stuff first, egging each other on. 'C'mon, I'll fight ya!', and 'C'mon, put 'em up', and dares, like drawing a line in the sand and telling the other boy if he crosses that line that will start the fight. And both boys are supposed to make their fists, you don't just hit someone who isn't ready. If one of the boys wears glasses, they have to take their glasses off. I didn't have glasses yet back then, too bad, maybe that would have helped. But let's say one of the boys is carrying something, like their books, they're supposed to put them down first. And no biting, no slapping, no kicking, no hair pulling or gouging, just hitting, punching with your fists. So, that's part of it, I wouldn't do any of the fight-game stuff, I wouldn't square off and put my fists up, I'd just act like nothing was

happening, and they'd get really frustrated, but it's like mostly they didn't know what to do next if the other boy just ignored them. Then, the other thing, boys that age don't know how to hit very hard. I got hit a few times, but it didn't hurt that much, and it really freaked them out when I still wouldn't fight back. They'd call me names, you know, coward and sissy and retard and queerbait and whatever else they could think of."

"That's very interesting. I didn't know that. I saw boys fighting when I was growing up, but I didn't have brothers. I always assumed you had to fight back or you'd get hurt."

"It got to be more that way when I got older. Boys learn how to be meaner and crueler. How to hurt someone more effectively. When I was in sixth grade, a boy was determined to make me fight and I was still nonviolent then, and I wouldn't have known how to fight by then anyhow, since I hadn't been doing it in all that time... he kept aiming carefully and hitting me hard, in the face, and after awhile it really *hurt*, he made me break down crying. But when I first started, in third grade, it was easy, and it was like there wasn't anything they could do about it."

"I can see that would fit in with your sense that you were different from the other boys."

"Yeah. What was in my head at the time was that I was more like the girls than I was like the other boys, and it meant being more like a grownup, more self-controlled and mature, and that was all wrapped together for me, at least for a long time it was. Of course, I wasn't like *all* the girls, and the girls in general weren't militant children's libbers either. They often got treated like more responsible people than the boys, and trusted more, but adults could definitely be unfair to girls a lot too. 'This is okay for me because I'm an adult but not for you because you're just a little girl'. Not to mention all the 'You don't get to do those things because they're only

for boys” stuff. As kids went, I was among the more uppity. I thought most rules should apply to everyone equally, and if kids can’t behave right, the rule would be about the behavior, not about being a kid. We had a teacher in sixth grade who spoke disrespectfully and contemptuously to us but wanted us to be respectful to her, she was very intolerant that way, and I didn’t think it was fair, so I circulated a petition and got the other kids to sign it asking the principal to fire her.”

“So you were nonviolent and a bit of a civil rights rebel for children’s rights, and you thought you were more like the girls.”, Theresa summarizes. “And pretty advanced for your age, from what you’ve told me. These are all a part of a type of thinking that most children don’t do much of until they’re older.”

“Yeah, that too. Abstract thinking. I’ve thought about that too. I don’t know why, but yeah... when we were first graders one morning, lining up for the bell to ring to let us in, the line next to us was the kindergartners, you know, and some of the first grade kids starting singing, ‘Kindergarten babies, join in the Navies’, whatever the hell that means, sung to the nanny nanny boo boo song, you know? And I felt ‘This is wrong, hey, we, the first-grade kids, we were in kindergarten just last year ourselves, so taunting them is wrong, they are who *we* were, and *we* sure as hell weren’t babies last year’. There were principles. That’s why I didn’t like adults just saying ‘do this, do that’. Everything is right or wrong for a reason.”

I sigh. “By the time I started fourth grade, I was pretty cut off. It had made me into a misfit without any friends, or hardly any friends. And then it got so much worse. I kind of fossilized, I had a whole bunch of beliefs and attitudes and I was full of hate for these kids who treated me so

bad, and so I had become really judgmental. I'd made my mind up about so many things and I was sure I was right."

"Doesn't sound like the other kids were any less judgmental or more open-minded, at least not the way you've been telling it."

"They weren't, but their way of doing it only made them fit in better. I was just as intolerant, but they had me outnumbered, and my way made me a total misfit. So I finally started to bust out of that shell some, around eighth grade, and reexamine stuff, and try to connect with people, because I was very lonely and isolated."

"Your parents, I'm curious to know what was their attitude and how did they react to all this?"

I pause and consider. Look down at the table surface. "They were supportive to the point of cheering me on, and believed in me in a kind of unquestioned way. Being different in and of itself wasn't any kind of bad thing in their view. But they got worried that I didn't mesh socially and have friends, and they worried that I was unhappy about all the hostility, which I assume was pretty obvious. I imagine that from their point of view, I was miserable, which indeed I was; and that I was asking them to fix it, to protect me. So essentially I'm here because they're still trying to protect me."

"How about their reaction to your sex role non-conformity? Are they aware of it, and what's been their attitude? Were they supportive, or was it a problem at home, too?"

"Well, as far as the 'not being one of the boys' thing, *they* never brought it up; people outside the family did, to *me*, grownups as well as kids my own age, and so I find it a little hard to

believe that nobody took it upon themselves to say something to my parents about it. But I hadn't brought it up to my parents. Not back then, I mean. So it wasn't out in the open, but home felt safe in that regard, the attitude people had about not being like the other boys was stuff I only ran into outside. A couple years ago, I did come out to them, I mean I figured a lot of this stuff out for myself and finally started talking about it to everyone, parents included, but... they get all embarrassed and uncomfortable whenever I do, so that's been kind of disappointing, considering how much they seemed to be on my side during the worst years growing up. But on the other hand, it was their idea for me to try a career as a nurse. They suggested this quite some time after I first tried talking to them about it, after I came out. I mean, in other words, they didn't react to me trying to talk about it by repulsing from any of it. But either they didn't want to talk about it, or my way of saying it, of trying to explain it, wasn't making sense to them."

"So... ", Theresa says slowly, "...you were saying before that you tried to bust out of your shell around eighth grade because you felt cut off and lonely..."

"Well, yeah... and that was successful to an extent. I got over wanting the adults to let me in as a junior edition adult, and got into rebelling against authority the same way they did, the other kids, we were finally on the same channel with that. And I could talk ideas with other people my own age, abstract concepts, like at pot parties, getting stoned and talking about whether people from some other planet would think like us, like what was universal and what might not be.

Or in church group about what's moral, who gets hurt in this situation, what's the right thing

or who is in the right.

Oh, and I learned how to fight if I absolutely had to. But I didn't want to change my personality and how I behave to be like other boys in general, I liked how I was, which still included a lot of ways that girls are assumed to be, things like priorities and values, but also nuances and little stuff... the boys had made such a big deal about not being like the girls, and I hadn't, I hadn't avoided that, so now I was seen as girlish. And everyone thought, 'gay guy, obviously', you know, and the truth was, it was complicated because I still liked the girls, admired them and thought of them as people like me, you know, but... I also found them sexy and wanted things to happen, and the sex thing, *it* has rules. Remember the boys with their rules in third grade about how to get into fights? Well, the sixteen year olds, ...both the boys and the girls, they had rules, almost like a dance with dance steps. Well, for either sex or relationships, I mean, I wanted all that to happen, but the script didn't work for me because I hadn't spent my childhood being a normal boy, and now I had different attitudes and priorities and stuff than what it was apparently assumed I had. The role script assumes boys and girls want different things, specific different things, that they have a different set of motivations and priorities, and the same behavior is interpreted differently depending on what sex you're perceived as. Double standards on everything, practically."

"That's the central core of gender, right there," Theresa says.

= August 2, 1982 (Day Fifteen) =

I wake up to the sound of a key in the lock, and watch as Theresa comes back in from the alcove with a cup of coffee. I stretch and swing my feet over the side of my bed.

“Oh, hi, you’re awake”, she says. “My shift’s ending soon, so I’m glad I’ll get a chance to say goodbye.”

“Thank you again for listening to me ramble. It really does help to have someone to talk to.”

*That’s an understatement. I feel listened to and understood. I’m still scared but thank you.*

*Thank you for being here and for being you.*

“I’m glad. I hope things work out for you.”

We sit in companionable silence while she sips her coffee and reads from her book. Shortly before seven, the outside door buzzes and another nurse comes in, shakes hands with Theresa, takes the chart from her. Theresa gives me a smile and a wave and departs.

My new nurse has a strikingly symmetrical oval face framed in commas of golden brown hair. She holds my chart close to her chest and does a visual inventory of the room. Or... not quite. Her eyes flick away from staring directly at me and go on behind and beyond me, like a person who doesn’t want to exceed her station by making intrusive eye contact.

After several moments, she lowers herself gingerly into the chair, opens my chart, and buries herself in it.

I can hear some small ticking sounds. They seem to be coming from low on the far wall. A radiator comes to mind. Of course they aren’t running the heat, not in Houston in July. But it sounds just like the heat coming on in my grandparents’ home in the cooler months. I wonder

how they're doing.

My parents seemed genuinely glad that I'd accepted their offer and gone there, and both Grandma and Grandpa had said they were happy to have me staying with them. But was it because I was actually *needed* there — that I've been providing necessary services for Grandpa? Or was it because my grandparent's home was a convenient place to *put me* and the family felt I needed looking after? If I was really taking up the slack in necessary home attendant or nurses' aide services, how are they doing in my absence? Have they had to hire someone else to come in? I don't know what to wish for. I'm not fond of the idea that my whole family felt like I needed to be *put* somewhere where I could be watched and kept out of trouble. But I don't like thinking of them having to shell out for a home health aide, either. Or me leaving them in the lurch to spend time here in this thrilling vacation resort.

Is there a word for that kind of ambivalence towards something, where it isn't that you're somewhere in the mushy middle about it, or confused, but where you actually feel strong contradictory feelings about something; the feelings are all quite clear, it's complexity not confusion...? They all make sense when you look to see where they're coming from?

When I think about the prospect of Dr. Barnes coming in and telling me what they're going to do with me, that's kind of like that. I don't like not knowing, but I'm also scared of what might be happening to me. My stomach clenches whenever I think about him coming in here.

What is he going to claim? Let's see... I climb around in dusty ceilings where I might get hurt, I go walking around the corridors like I'm obsessed, umm, of course I'm in denial about alcohol and drugs, *oh* and let's not forget *paranoid schizophrenic* and I continue to display



inappropriate behavior and all that other stuff in my file. Bloody fucking hell, is that enough, can he just say all this means I'm crazy and so they get to keep me locked up?

New nurse Ms. Cuteness over here is reading all that awful stuff about me right now. Maybe I should interact with her some and try to offset that.

Eventually, my new one-on-one professional looks up from my chart. I give her a cordial nod; she startles for a second, then goes back to examining my file. Additional moments go by.

There's a telephone on the wall; she abruptly turns to it, lifts the receiver off, doesn't dial. After a moment, there's the buzz of a person's voice. She says, "Hello. This is Angela Keith, room fourteen-a, with ...*the patient*. What do I do about if I need a break, is someone able to be a relief?...". Buzz, buzz. "I'd like to use the bathroom and get some coffee." Buzz, zz-buz, buzz. "Oh. Okay."

Angela replaces the receiver, then rises in a smooth motion, pivots, and heads out the seclusion room doorway into the alcove area, closing the metal door behind her with a click. Locking me in.

I would read my chart again, to see how they documented what went down yesterday evening, but she took it with her. I don't have much to base this on yet, to be fair, but I have a suspicion nonetheless that it wouldn't avail me much to ask her to let me see it.

I hear the key in the door, and as it swings open, I ask, "Would you mind getting some coffee for me as well? I'd get it myself but I don't think I'm allowed out."

Angela finishes splashing the top layer of her coffee onto the floor and looks around wildly, perhaps in hopes of finding someone else more qualified to answer. Apparently finding none,

she speaks. “I don’t think you’re allowed. Caffeine interacts with your medication.”

“I’m not on any medication”, I reply.

Angela stares back at me for a double long count. Then she seats herself. Takes the telephone again. Waits for the voice. Bzz-zz. “This is Angela Keith again. Sorry to bother you... the *patient* is asking for a cup of coffee. I thought...

“Yeah... no...

Okay.”

Again she rises, clicking the door closed behind her. Unlocks her way back in a moment later with a cup held awkwardly in her other hand, purse over shoulder and chart sandwiched by her elbow against her side. After placing the other items on the mini-desk surface, she hands me the cup. It’s got milk and sugar added to it. I’ll drink it anyway this time.

“You’re Angela?” She jumps again when I speak. “Hi, I’m Derek. Thanks for the coffee.”

“Yes, that’s my name, I’m Angela Keith and I’m your nurse.”

I nod to that. “I was a community resident here. I suppose I still am. We *are* patients, though, it’s all just nomenclature. We’re patients, they’re doctors, and this is a hospital, and calling it something different doesn’t change what it is.”

“No.”

“I told them I’d decided I didn’t want to stay here any longer. I was very polite about it and just said that if I’d understood it right, I was allowed to leave, and they came in with a team of people and moved me here into seclusion.” I smile and shrug. “I still don’t know why.”

Angela’s eyes are big and round, her face serious and sad. She shakes her head. “I can’t

answer that, you need to ask your doctor.”

I sip my disgusting sticky-sweet coffee substance.

The outside metal door buzzes and a staffer comes in with hospital stand trays on wheels, with breakfast for each of us. More coffee, this time unadulterated. Mediocre biscuit, congealed undercooked scrambled eggs, decent bacon. It tastes better than it should, I’m hungry and also it gives me something to do. We eat in silence. The coffee is nice.

I’m ready for a bathroom break of my own, so I rise. Angela half-rises with me, the remains of a biscuit in one hand. “Where are you please sit down what are you doing where are you going?”

“I’m going into the bathroom. I’m going to do predictable and likely things in there, and then I will come back out.”

“I’m timing you”, Angela tells me. “Go ahead.”

I reopen the door shortly after that. Apparently in sufficient time. I’m about to move towards my bed to sit on it as I was before, but a sort of electronic chirp and a squeal suddenly starts up from my left. It’s really loud. It seems to be coming from the alcove area just outside the seclusion room. Curious and annoyed, I glance back and pivot on my heel, looking towards the sound.

“Stay away from that door!”, Angela shouts.

“Oh, for God’s sake!”, I respond. I grab the door handle and pull the door shut. It goes *click!* The squealing sound is somewhat cut off. Angela’s eyes go wide.

I flounce down on my bed in disgust. Angela, meanwhile, is standing now, on the far side of

the chair-desk. Staring at me very fixedly. She reaches for the door handle without looking at it. Twists it. Door doesn't open. Oh, now I get it. There's no keyhole on this side.

I watch Angela. After a few seconds, she starts sliding closer to the wall telephone, unblinking eyes locked on me. She lifts the receiver and waits. No buzzing voice-sound this time. "Oh, *c'mon*", she says, pushing and releasing the hangup lever.

I wait. She waits. She tries again. Makes a sound of exasperation under her breath. Lowers the receiver with a solid clack and raises it once more.

"Bzz bzz, bzz?" it finally says.

"*Hello* this is Angela Keith in room fourteen-a and I'm locked in with the patient and the door is locked can you send someone please? ...yeah! ...no... yes! oh...yes... okay." She hangs up.

Inhale. Exhale. Repeat.

"So...", I say to her conversationally, "...how does it feel, to be locked up in a place you can't get out of, and scared of what someone there might do to you?"

\* \* \*

The outside door buzzes and swings open. A compact man with black-rimmed eyeglasses in a business suit and carrying a briefcase enters, escorted by a pair of facility orderlies who remain at the door as he walks on in.

"Derek Turner?", he calls out. I wave. He comes over. Hands Angela and me each a

business card. “I am with Texas Mental Hygiene Legal Services. I’ll need some privacy to confer with my client, ma’am, so if you could wait outside?” Angela disappears through the door.

“Robert Tally”, he says, and shakes my hand. “How are you holding up?”

“I’ve had better days, but worse ones too. I just want to get out of this place. I sure am glad to see you! No one will tell me anything!”

“Well, first things first”, he tells me, and takes out a one-page document from his briefcase. “This is a 72 hour letter, which officially notifies Elk Meadow of your intent to leave. The law says that voluntary patients can’t be held for longer than that unless a court hearing finds that they need to be converted to involuntary status. Do you understand what I’m saying so far?”

“I’ve heard about 72 hour letters, but they’ve always told us in here that we could leave at any time, don’t they have to make good on that if they promised us that?”

“Unfortunately, no. What’s in the law is that they can hold you 72 hours. That’s from the time you make it official, which this document does, once we file it. Now, they can contest it, and they’ve indicated that they will. So this forces them to file a motion to contest your release and put you on involuntary hold, and that starts the clock ticking. Let me know if I need to explain any of that before we go any further.”

“I sign this and you submit it, and then if they don’t file a motion, they have to let me go after 72 hours. But they’re saying that they will, they’re going to try to keep me here against my will.”

Robert Tally nods.

“Why? What’s their excuse for saying I can’t leave?”

“I’ll get to that in a moment, but I want to cover the procedural stuff first, I want you to have a clear understanding of how this all works. An observational period is required in any contested release where the facility requests an involuntary hold. The hospital is going to argue that they’ve had you here and therefore the required observation has already occurred, and they’ll submit their impression of you. We will try to convince the judge that there should be a separate and independent observation, for the sake of neutrality, and that would be at a public state-run psychiatric facility.”

“I always thought being locked in a state hospital meant you get pumped full of Thorazine and stuck in a corner to drool. I’ve only been in a private bin, but I was under the impression that the state bins were even worse.”

“Well, they won’t tolerate any nonsense or clowning around, that’s for sure, they’re understaffed and don’t have time for any of that. But they don’t have a vested interest in keeping you locked up, so if you keep your nose clean for 72 hours, they’d probably say they don’t see any reason you should be retained involuntarily.”

“Yeah, okay, I can do low profile and obedient, if they don’t automatically shoot everyone up with drugs.” I swallow. I’m not good at low profile and obedient.

“The standard we have to concern ourselves with officially is ‘danger to self or others’. To hold you on an involuntary basis, the law says you have to be determined to be a danger. Unless they have any justification for saying you’ve attacked people or threatened them, that’s usually going to be ‘danger to self’.”

“I’ve read my chart, I swiped it and read the whole thing, at least how it was at the time, and it says I’m *paranoid schizophrenic*”, I tell him. “And it’s full of notes saying my behavior is inappropriate, but nothing about self-harm. I did do something that they might try to make sound like was more dangerous than it actually was, I climbed up through the acoustic tiles into the ceiling crawl space. I was looking to see if that could be a way out.”

“They always introduce chart notes and they’ll always try to make the case that the patient lacks good judgment and will make bad decisions and be a danger to themselves. Plus, the doctor will say ‘Well, I am a highly trained professional psychiatrist and my opinion is that this person will harm themselves if we don’t hold on to them and treat them in here’, you can count on that happening. But the state has limited resources, so that’s your best bet, that the judge doesn’t see any reason to waste them on someone who isn’t really causing any problems.”

I sign the 72 hour letter and date it. Tally shakes my hand and departs.

Angela comes back in and seats herself in her chair.

After about five minutes of silence, I ask, “While you were out there, did you get any sense of what’s making that annoying squealing sound?”

Angela looks back for a moment or two. Shrug. “Not really.” Pause. “It really is annoying, though.”

“Yes. I don’t know if it’s the pitch or what, but it just drills right into my brain.”

Angela compresses her lips into a tight little line. She doesn't speak again and I decide against trying to keep a conversational volley going.

She seems younger than me, maybe just twenty or twenty one. Sent here by a temp agency. I'm guessing newly graduated LPN with no contract position, listed as available for temporary work, and got called in for a type of work she's had limited experience in. She might as well be wearing a t-shirt that proclaims 'I got assigned to sit alone with a dangerous psychotic lunatic paranoid schizophrenic and I'm about to pee my pants'.

I feel a certain vindictive pleasure about being scary at the moment. I became especially aware of that when I inadvertently locked us in together and then saw how horrified and trapped it made her feel. That's not very nice, rejoicing in the power to threaten someone. But I'm terrified myself, and it felt good to have the shoe on the other foot like that.

So... what if we look at matters as if I were the initial threat? I mean, going all the way back. The kids in grade school. And the occasional adult, too. The hateful way they behaved, when I hadn't done anything to them and didn't deserve it and couldn't figure out why everyone was being so mean to me. What if they felt threatened by me? I never did anything to hurt anyone, but I broke some unspoken codes of conduct, how boy children are expected to behave, how other boys like *us* are supposed to be, how one's students can be expected to act. If somebody doesn't act the way you thought they would, you end up not having much confidence about your sense of what they might do next.

And of course if there's a right way to be a boy child student, and we all know what it is, we're secure in thinking we know how things are supposed to be, but if there's one who isn't like



that, then either he's wrong or our thinking is wrong. Suppose our thinking includes the notion that it matters, having everyone being the way they're supposed to be, so there isn't even any room for 'he isn't the way he's supposed to be but it doesn't matter'. So that's a different kind of threat, but yeah, that too.

They want to lock me up as dangerous. That's another way of saying threatening. I guess I kind of am. I need to get over being amazed that people keep reacting like I've done something wrong. They always have and I should assume that they always will. It's good and empowering to believe I am actually not doing anything wrong, and it's them, what they're doing is wrong. And to call it oppression and so on. But it's important to get back to why the oppression is. They're scared. You try to get a handle on why people would be hateful and oppressive and you just end up finding them guilty of being horrible people with no justification, and there's no understanding for that. But I can understand scared. I don't know what to do about it, but it's a starting point.

\*       \*       \*

That strange annoying squeal has finally stopped. I lay down to nap for awhile, and do manage to doze off, curled up on my side on the mattress.

They bring us lunch on those adjustable wheeled tray tables, and I sit up. Angela is doing crossword puzzles and continues as she eats.

I'm mostly contemplating what that guy Robert from Mental Hygiene Services told me. I'd

like my day in court, if it were going to be fair, because...maybe I'm naïve, but I can't imagine any reasonable unbiased judge agreeing that I should be kept here, or anywhere else for that matter, against my will. But what if the judge doesn't agree to the separate three day observation period and just accepts what Elk Meadow has decided about me as my assessment?

What would be a lot more fair would be if a special panel was set up to evaluate mental condition questions, and they didn't get any case histories, just a chance to evaluate people independently of all that. And some of the people they evaluate should be randomly chosen people, sprinkled among the people whose sanity or capacity are being officially questioned. Not to look for other psychotics but an experiment to see whether the people whose sanity is in official question appear any more dangerous or deranged to the panelists than the control group does. The panelists won't know which of the people they evaluate are actually there by court order and which ones are the ringers.

\* \* \*

Why is it legal for them to lie to us? "If you don't like it here you can leave any time." Why isn't this a violation of contract or something? Actually — never mind the contract kind of law stuff, why isn't it a violation of my civil rights to be told one thing — that I can leave if I want to — but in reality a different set of laws apply instead?

Either way, don't I get any legal protection against misrepresentation of the facts by medical professionals?

\* \* \*

Shortly after lunch, the outer door buzzes and opens, and Dr. James Barnes enters. “Nurse, you can take a break. I need to speak with Derek privately”, he tells her. The door clicks behind Angela as she leaves.

Barnes steeples his fingers in front of him, looks at me contemplatively. “Here is what’s going to happen”, he tells me. “You need to rescind that letter. Your course of treatment here isn’t done yet. You’re also going to need to agree to begin taking two milligrams of a medication called Navane, twice a day. It’s an antipsychotic, but a more modern one that won’t give you the side effects of the older medicines. I’m prescribing it in liquid form, and you’ll drink a glass of water afterwards, in front of the nurse, so don’t think you’ll be hiding a pill under your tongue. We’re doing this my way.”

He smiles a kind-looking smile. “Otherwise, you see, we’ll be going to court. Where you’ll lose. You see, I play golf with the judge. We’ve eaten in each other’s dining rooms. You need to understand that I’m an important man and I run an important institution here, one that has enhanced the reputation of the community. What do you think will happen when you lose in court? Oh, you won’t go here, we don’t take involuntarily committed patients here at Elk Meadow. You’ll be remanded to the Harris County Psychiatric Center. Interestingly enough, I

know the administrators and doctors on staff there pretty well, too. With a word from me, they'll shoot you up with much stronger drugs and maybe a round of electroshock to get started. You will never, ever, find yourself on the outside of a psychiatric institution again. I will see to that."

I don't answer him, but I'm sure he can see the impact on my face.

He rises. "I'll need an answer by tomorrow afternoon", he tells me, and saunters out of my cubicle.

\* \* \*

I'm scared and I desperately want this to all go away.

I've always been profoundly terrified by the idea of being drugged for the specific purpose of overriding my will. I once watched a children's cartoon where a cat puts something in a mouse's drink, at which point the mouse cheerfully reveals all the secrets that betray the entire mouse community to the cats, and this struck me as really creepy and horrible.

Years later, I read a Marge Piercy book, *Woman on the Edge of Time*, that explicitly features a psychiatric institution where they've found a way of inserting electrodes into someone's brain and can then make them hate anything they currently love or care about. Or become sweetly and enthusiastically cooperative with people they're fervently opposed to.

I wish Theresa was on duty here and I could talk to her. I wish I wasn't so utterly alone with this right now.

“Angela?”, I say, “I want to apologize if I’ve acted like a jerk. It must not be easy to be brought into this as a temporary position. I’m just scared.”

She shrugs, “You don’t really have to apologize to me. I was taught not to take anything personally that patients may say to me, and to just ignore it.”

I wish I had a book to read.

If I agree to what Barnes wants, I’ll be on mind-changing drugs in a matter of just hours. If I don’t, that could be what happens anyway.

It’s not just being drugged. It’s that it would be ongoing, with no end in sight. And him having me here in this place, with no end in sight for that either. I told him I need human connection, approval, the chance to belong, but that I don’t need it today and I don’t need it from him. But if I need it eventually, and the only places I can get it are from him and people he controls...

I’m scared of losing who I am, and becoming institutionalized inside my head, being broken, giving up inside. I’m also scared of fighting back, of blowing up and then getting retaliated against for it, where they use it as an excuse to do more things to me.

Pulling the wings off flies indeed. Barnes is plain evil. No part of this is about what’s in the best interests of the patient. This is an act of assault.

You create a position where someone has that much power over a whole community of people, where that’s even possible, it really creates a cushy little social space for the sadistic control freaks. He’s a vampire, feeding off his victims’ terror and misery and despair.

I hate him and I’m furious, and the anger and hate feel better than the terror of what’s

looming in front of me, so I feed it.

\* \* \*

Supper is brought in for us. I'm not hungry. My stomach feels like I just dined on a box of Brillo pads. When Angela takes my vitals, I can hear the thud thud thud of my heart, I can practically see it, round smooth-edged thumps of pressure and sound, like discs made of rubbery gelatin, the kinds of shapes you see if you close your eyes and rub your eyelids. Every minute is miserable and lasts forever and yet it was just lunch not that long ago.

The outer door buzzes and Angela's replacement enters, shakes Angela's hand and identifies herself as Irene Walsh, asks for any updates aside from what's charted.

Angela says it's been a quiet shift, nothing to report, and is out the door. *Yeah, bye to you too.*

"You must be Derek. I'm Irene. I don't see any evening medication ordered for you, is that correct?"

"Yes, I'm not on any medication", I confirm. For now. My remaining hours of having a mind.

"Well, you're welcome to sleep, or..." Irene starts off, but she's taking in the starkness of this space as she's speaking. "Wow, no TV or *anything*? You want me to see if I can get them to bring one in?"

"What I'd really like is to have my book. I was in the middle of a book, it's back in my

room, and it would give me something to take my mind off of things and give me something to do. I keep forgetting to ask whenever there's someone who could do anything about it."

Irene nods. "You can't go to your room, but let me see if maybe someone can bring it to you." She lifts the receiver, and after a moment the crackly buzz of a person on the other end comes through. "Hey, this is Irene Walsh, from Silas Pros down in, what is this room number, the seclusion room for Derek Turner? ...yeah... no everything's fine, but, hey, listen, he wants his reading book, you think it would be okay for someone to bring it over here for him? ...hold on..."

She looks over at me. "What's the name of it and where would they find it?"

"It's called *Fear of Flying* and I think it's on my bedside table, or else on top of the dresser in my room."

Irene repeats that information into the telephone, says uh huh and yes that's fine to whatever's being said to her, then hangs up. "One of the residents will look for it and bring it if they can find it."

Ten minutes later, there's a knock on the outer door. Irene says "That's probably it", and goes out to open it. I can't see who it is but the voice sounds like Jake's. Outer door closes and she returns, handing the book to me.

"Thanks!"

Shortly after that, I get up to go to the bathroom. I'm seated on the toilet when there's a flicker of light — on off, on off — coming from under what I'd assumed was a bathroom supplies closet, a locked door directly across from the one leading to my holding cell.

I crouch down. I think I see the bottoms of shoes on tile. I get my mouth up as close as I can to the space under the door and hiss, “Hey, who’s out there?”

“Derek?” Valerie’s voice, I’m pretty sure.

“Yeah”

“Me, and Jake and April. Hey man, you okay?”

Jake’s voice adds, “We saw them carry you down the hall. Man that’s fucked up. This ain’t right, dude.”

The bathroom I’m in has one of those combined switches where turning on the light turns on a fan as well, for which I’m suddenly grateful. I have some white noise to mask this conversation.

I answer, “I’m not happy and I don’t want to be here, but I’m okay at the moment. It’s so good to hear from you guys. Barnes wants to put me on psych drugs.”

April says “Is there anything we can do? Distract the staff while you climb out a window or something?”

I smile. Haven’t smiled much lately. Not that they can see. “I think if I had a knife, I know how to get out of this place.”

“Well, yeah. A gun would work even better.”

“No, I mean a regular table knife. Like from the cafeteria.”

Jake says, “Stick a sheet of toilet paper under the door whenever you can be in the bathroom and we’ll know. You ain’t the first person to get stuck in seclusion. It sucks but keep your head down and be cool.”



“Yeah, I can’t do anything at all from in here, so I’m just going to have to hope I get a chance later. Hey, I just got a new nurse so I don’t want to spend too much time in here and get her all suspicious, but I’ll do that later on, thanks.”

I come back out, my finger holding my place in my book. Irene meets my eyes, gives a three-fingered wave.

I’m amazed at how much better I feel.

\* \* \*

I read some, nap some, read some more.

“So, do you get sent to hospitals and nursing homes all over the area?”, I ask Irene.

“Yeah, pretty much”, she confirms. “Covering for maternity leave, or things like this, temp situations to cover a special needs. I’m waitlisted to start at Menninger, which has good benefits, but they keep bumping my start date.”

I tell Irene about my having studied to be an LPN and my internship at the Athens Hospital, and Mr. Samperson and how I got dismissed from the program.

She asks where I grew up. How old I am.

Later on, I go into the bathroom again. There’s a table knife waiting for me on the tile floor. Can’t do anything with it from here but I appreciate the thought. I unroll some toilet paper and fold it in half and extend it out under the door into the hallway out there, sliding it back and

forth. But I don't get a response. I pull it back in when I leave.

= August 3, 1982 (Day Sixteen) =

I wake up angry with my parents. Possibly I was dreaming about them, although I don't recall doing so. More likely, just the back of my head processing stuff while I slept. At any rate, my mind is echoing with memories of all the conversations I had with them about how this place wasn't going to be a snake pit like Mountain View had been. How they'd emphasized that if I didn't like it I could just sign out and leave. But my chart has a form with my father's signature on it, indicating that Elk Meadow can do stuff to me against my will if they want to. I'm not sure what the Texas laws say, but generally parents can't consent on behalf of their adult children, only minor children. It probably means he's agreed that they'll pay for my stay even if the facility force-treats me somewhere along the line. Any way you cut it, it's a betrayal. He has no right to sign such a thing without even talking to me about it. And my mom has to have known too.

Not only that, but when I broke out and went to Melinda and Reggie's, my parents' only concern was getting me right back in. They didn't waste any time considering that maybe this damn facility wasn't a safe or healthy place for me to be.

You occasionally hear about parents disowning their children for stepping so far over the line that they don't want any more to do with them. Does one disown one's parents? That's not

really a phrase I've encountered. People turning their backs on their parents, though, sure, I've known lots of people who've done that, and others who aren't quite so absolute about it but strictly limit their contact to holidays and rare occasions and keep their parents out of their daily lives.

Shit. I love my folks. Has it come to this? I don't know if I can forgive this. I think I can still love them but I'm not sure I'll ever again trust them. They were the people who protected me, kept me safe in a world where it sometimes seemed like everyone was out to get me. Now they have become part of the world I'm not safe from.

It could just be the mood I'm in. The situation that I'm in. I might feel different about it later, if I get out of this and we make up somehow. Get some distance and some perspective on it. But that's not how it feels. It feels like a fundamental sea change, a permanent shift. Like I previously didn't always trust their judgment on individual issues and matters, but I always trusted that they had my best interests at heart. Now I think that's permanently off of the taken for granted table. I suspect that from now on I'll evaluate anything they say or do the same way I would from anybody else, with a certain self-sustaining distance and dubious caution. Their notion of what's in my best interests is so far off-base that caring about me doesn't matter.

Is this just a part of growing up? Does everyone get to this point in their relationship with their parents, where they take on the last vestiges of total responsibility for their own safety and no longer feel like their mom and dad will take care of them if need be?

I don't know, but I know I feel very sad and very lonely.

\* \* \*

Dr. Barnes said I had until this afternoon to make my decision, but I feel cold and tactically rational at the moment and don't see any advantage to delaying the process. "Irene?", I say, "would you do me a favor? Can you convey to the office people that I've decided to accept Dr. Barnes' terms? I think they'll know how to proceed from there."

She lifts the phone and passes this message on. At my request, she fetches a cup of coffee and brings one for herself. I'm still drinking from it when the outer door opens.

"I hear you've decided to cooperate", Dr. Barnes says, all friendly and collegial. "I'm glad to hear it. Okay, first let's have you sign this form, which rescinds your 72 hour letter. And date it... that's it. You can go ahead and gather up your stuff. Hmm, I don't guess you have anything here, really. Well, come on, then, you can walk back with me. I think your friends will be glad to see you back."

That pretty much kills any faint chance of smuggling that table knife back with me, so I leave it behind.

The hospital PA speakers are playing the Boz Scaggs "Lido Shuffle." I find myself trying to turn it into some kind of portent but can't find any message within it that seems relevant.

There are no temporary reprieves. Barnes delivers me to the medication line outside the Unit Two nurses' station and personally watches me drink the dose and the required cup of water behind it.

\* \* \*

Mark Raybourne shakes his head in the classic gesture of disbelief. “I don’t know where you came up with that notion, so don’t try to put it off on me. What I meant was that you know what you need to work on, your issues and your problems and in particular your attitude towards the program here, and that’s how you get out.”

“I’m sorry”, I backtrack. “I didn’t mean that to sound like I took your advice and so it’s your fault what happened. I was thinking along those lines already. I mean, I thought I was being childish by staying here and trying to win the arguments and have my opinions prevail, when I could just leave if I didn’t like it. So when you said that, I thought you were pointing to the same thing, that if this isn’t a good place for me and isn’t helping me with my real stuff, why was I being foolish about it, why didn’t I just leave?”

“Look”, Mark implores me, “I had no idea it was going to go down like this. I would have warned you if I thought he would do this.”

“So you *were* suggesting I just get the hell out of Dodge. C’mon, it’s just us here. I’m not trying to pin this on you. You know this isn’t right.”

Mark sighs. Stares at me for a count of three. “You’re pretty self-aware in a lot of ways but you sure do have some blind spots. All this time, it never struck you as odd? I mean, you ending up in this bin with all these mainliners and hardcases...the other residents, they think you belong here and just won’t admit it, but you know that’s not true. You’re somewhere you don’t belong, so who put you here? You still think your parents are naïve and just hooked up with Barnes by

accident, huh? You want to see naïve, check your mirror next time when you brush your teeth.”

Mark glances down and away, breaking eye contact. He reaches up to adjust his eyeglasses for a moment. Then he looks back at me again and adds, “Of course you make it a real easy call for him. Barnes doesn’t like interference. He can be very... retaliatory...when someone crosses him. Ask his ex-wife. I’ve seen him...do things, but honestly I never seen him do anything like this to a resident. He doesn’t usually have to. Everything goes the way he wants. You got under his skin. Congratulations.”

“Yeah, somehow the result is problematic in ways I didn’t see coming. I don’t suppose you can do anything to help me get out of here?”

“Play by the rules. Play possum. Try to get something out of the program and ignore the rest. Color within the box, just like you learned in kindergarten. Or were you out when they covered that or something?”

\* \* \*

As I pass the nurse’s station on my way back to my room, I notice a table knife sitting on the waist-level counter next to the file racks. The one from my seclusion room? Why would they bring it here? This is a nurse’s station, not the dirty silverware bin in the cafeteria.

Am I being mocked? Taunted for having gotten my hands on this, like ‘Ha ha, see how much good this did you?’ or something? Or will I be called out for it and asked to explain why I

had it and how I got it — ‘Aha, we caught you with this’. Or neither of those things, but if not, then what? Just coincidence? That would be weird.

How could anybody know? I mean, so they find a table knife in the bathroom where I was in seclusion. Yeah, and?

They aren’t seriously going to try to document it as a deadly weapon wielded by the dangerous paranoid schizophrenic, are they? “He had a knife! He’s dangerous!” C’mon. Get real.

Jake and April and Valerie know in a vague way with no details. Could they have said something about it? They don’t really know what I wanted it for either, what could they tell them?

\* \* \*

I feel the same way it feels when I have the flu and I’m loaded full of antihistamines and cough syrup, the way they make you floaty and sleepy and your face feels packed in flannel. And the fever part of the flu, too, where everything seems kind of unreal and weird.

I’m going to go lie down.

Maybe nap.

\* \* \*

“Derek. Derek? Hey, wake up. They want you down at the nurses’ station”, Ronald tells me.

I yawn. Ronald’s face is out of focus, blurred. I squint, rub my eyes. My head hurts. I want to go back to sleep.

Wanted at the nurses’ station. Table knife. I’m in trouble. Maybe. Maybe they’ll make me eat with plastic cutlery from now on.

I realize I don’t have my shoes on. Must’ve taken them off before I sprawled out on the bed. It takes me three tries to tie my shoes.

They’re playing Journey’s “Who’s Crying Now?” and it’s loud and the lights are bright and the hallway tiles don’t stay straight when I walk.

I’m not in trouble about the table knife. Which is still out there on the countertop like it’s People’s Exhibit A or something. What the fuck. No, they just want me to take my medicine again.

I drink the poison and the water chaser and go back to bed. I’m probably supposed to be somewhere. I don’t care.

\* \* \*

I get up to pee. Where am I. Not Grandma’s. Room, in a place. Elk Meadow. Ronald. Asleep, his bed. Dark, must be late.

Head feels like stones wrapped in cotton. Don’t want to lay down any more. What time is



it? Hallway. Close the door. Cafeteria?

Cafeteria. Be nice if there's food still. I didn't eat. Passed out on bed. Food. I'm hungry. There's Noelle.

"Hey, Derek. How are you? We saw them carry you down the hall, they had you tied to the cot. Shit, man, maybe I was too fast about your patient rights thing, I didn't know they could do that to us. What's going to happen to you now?"

"Is there still food? I'm starving!"

"Uhhh, just some apples and they sometimes leave some boxes of cereal behind, you'll have to check."

I'm annoyed there's no hot food. Stalk over to get an apple, box of corn flakes, just eat it out of the damn box, dry will be fine.

Crunch crunch of corn flakes. Chomp of apple.

I'm two thirds of the way through the little box of cereal when a dull sleepy horror pushes through into my head. They are methodically destroying my mind, and I'm awake and time is short but I'm acting like all that matters, all that's important, is food. My big anger is because there's no hot food left for me to eat?? See, they *are* destroying my mind. I have to get out of here. I have to get out of here. I have to get out of here.

I walk back out into the corridors.

Nurses' station. The quiet of 1:15 in the morning, that's what the clock says. Nurse typing and filing.

Table knife. It's still out here.

It's bait isn't it. They're waiting for me to snatch it and then BAM, they pounce.

Yeah then what? I get in oh so much trouble for picking up a table knife?

It can't be coincidence. But I don't get it.

They're daring me. Here, let's see you do something with this.

They're daring me. Go ahead and escape, you can't survive out there.

They're hoping I'll just leave.

I don't know.

I can feel my heart beat as I approach it. This is where they do something, they'll say something, I'm *filching it with my fingers*, it's between the second and third fingers of my right hand, now flipping the knife back against my forearm to hide it. They probably saw that. They were probably waiting for me to do that. They'll write it in my chart. They can't *not* be aware of how weird it is that they've had this table knife sitting out there. Some nurse would have put it away otherwise, *it doesn't belong here*, so since they didn't, they must have some kind of instructions. I'm playing into their hands. Maybe. I don't know. I walk, not with my ground-covering purposeful stride but my new shuffle. Nothing to see here, just wandering the hallway. Up the hall towards Unit Four. Around the corner. Past the piano. To my destination. The doors that lead to Joanne's recreation area.

They're double doors, the kind with the push bars. The push bar of the door on the right retracts a brass tongue which fits into a square socket at waist level in the door on the left. Or it would retract, except that there's a tiny hexagonal key hole in the base of the push bar where they disable it except during the time around recreation, so pushing it now wouldn't do anything.

The push bar of the door on the left, meanwhile, retracts two vertical poles that protrude up into the ceiling and down into the floor. That push bar isn't disabled. It doesn't have to be. There's a separate cast iron sliding tab on that side that also goes up into the ceiling, and a padlock on it to keep anyone from being able to retract it, so that door isn't opening if you push the push bar either.

Well...the cast iron sliding tab attaches to the left-hand door via a steel plate which is screwed into the door with six metal screws. Slot head. I've walked past that door every time I've come out here to play the piano.

I stick the table knife blade into the top left screw and give it a hard counterclockwise twist. It comes loose easily enough and after a few more turns I carefully place the screw down on the floor. I repeat with the two below it. Now for the three screws on the right. The one at the bottom is covered by the hasp of the padlock; it's going to be a problem, so I do the other two first. I lay the screws on the floor next to the others.

The plate with the sliding tab and its padlock is now attached to the door by just a single remaining screw, but I can't get an angle where I can use the table knife as a screwdriver as I had with the other five. The padlock's in the way.

The table knife is *serrated*. Not very sharp but it does have those faint little teeth and it's stainless steel. More of a file than a saw. I'm still alone. No one followed me here from the nurses' station to say "So that's what you wanted it for." No other residents have come this way. I lift the padlock out of the way as best I can, using my right hand, and begin sawing through the screw, directly under the head.

It makes a zuhh-huh, zuhh-huh sound which seems loud enough that people would hear it all the way back at the Unit Four nurses' station. I can't do anything about that, so I keep going, switching hands when my shoulder gets tired. Finally, I feel it starting to give way. Hmm, I don't want the plate to fall when it does; that would be even louder. I pick up one of the screws I took out earlier and run it back through one of the top holes. I finish sawing through the bottom screw and the head falls to the tiles with a faint click sound. Now I remove the top screw carefully, firmly pushing the plate against the door with my fingers and catching the screw in the palm of my hand. My right index finger reaches to tug on the sliding tab and the whole assembly lifts off neatly into my waiting left hand.

I lay it down on the concrete next to the screws I removed.

Okay. Now...

I walk back nonchalantly at my slow unhurried pace. Back to my room. Ronald still asleep. I grab *The Amazon's Brother*. I take a blank sheet of paper from the back and write a brief note to the staff, asking them to please send all my clothes and other possessions I'm leaving behind to my friend Luciana D'Urbanes in Albuquerque, writing her address there, and placing the note on my dresser. I take my lightweight sweater — brought at the insistence of my grandmother and not used the entire time I've been here — and tie it around my waist. Grab *Fear of Flying* and shove it inside the *Amazon's Brother* notebook.

Once again I walk past the nurses' station. This is where they'll call out and stop me. But they don't.

Down the corridor, past the piano, to the doors. No one waiting here with a triumphant

smile. If they're going to spring a trap on me, it will have to be soon.

I press the pushbars gently. The vertical bars on the left side door retract. The only thing keeping the doors in position now is the tongue extending from the right door into the socket on the left. I keep pushing. The doors ease outward and as they do, they move away from each other, each in its arc, anchored by their outside hinges, and the still-extended tongue slides out and past the socket and the doors are open. Cloudy dark sky, blast of humid air. I step out and close the doors silently behind me.

No audible alarm. I visualize a red light starting to blink on some fancy hi-tech security console somewhere. I walk down the descending path to where we used to meet Joanne for recreation, then through the trees, along the fence. It's dark, but I can see the branches I need to step over to avoid a spill. Briefly into the brightly-lit driveway, just long enough to dart through the main gate, and then dash back onto the lawn and out of the light. Twigs and old acorns pop under my feet. Sidewalk. I'm moving rapidly now. Intersection.

I'm off their property now. I'm out. Let's avoid those concerned suburban police Barnes mentioned. I make for the string of small businesses I walked past when I went to see that movie.

Sign says Business Loop 225 and points to the left. I follow it. Takes me over a bridge. I can see railroad tracks and darkened industrial buildings below me. Then a long stretch of warehouses in an area without streetlights, followed by a stand of trees. I'm tired. I shouldn't be tired, I can normally walk all day.

I am, though. It's starting to rain. I'm cold. I got out but it's dark and chilly and I don't have any place in the world where I'm safe. I'm always going to be a misfit. They'll probably chase me down and put me back. I want to fight back but they have all the power. My parents don't love me any more. Everyone thinks I'm a fuckup. I'll never get a job. I can't live like this, like a rat in the rain, free but on the desperate edge of survival. I can't do this. Why couldn't I have been born an alley cat or something more suited for this?

I have to lie down and rest. Over by those trees, far enough from the road that nobody could see me even if they were looking for me. I'm cold. My head hurts. I curl up and cover myself with leaves as best I can. I'm wet and miserable and everything is unfair. I cry myself to sleep.

= August 4, 1982 (First Day After) =

I wake up gradually. Warmer, even somewhat drier. No morning meeting to go to, mmm luxury to just lay here. Amazing how comfortable it can be, curled up in a mass of wet leaves with the sun shining down on me.

No one to herd me into the medication line...

I don't have to take the stuff! Hey, you know, that's probably why all I want to do is sleep. It's still hitting me hard. People probably adjust to it but it's still new to me so it really turns me into a zombie.

I should get moving. Stretch... brush leaves off pants and sweater, clean glasses off on shirt. The outside cover of *The Amazon's Brother* is pretty soaked, but it's one of those old-fashioned blue fabric covered three ring notebooks, I remember them getting wet in the rain when I was in elementary school and they were always fine after they dried out. The inside, the pages, some of them might end up wrinkly from getting wet but they're mostly typewritten with a few ink corrections.

I walk parallel to the highway but well off to the side. I'm still closer to the institution than I want to be before trying to catch a ride.

After about fifteen minutes, it starts to feel really good to be in motion like this, out for a walk. And I have so much to process.

The sun is already pretty intense, but not unpleasant. Maybe because I'm moving through the air, not standing still in it. I trod through ankle-high grass and deep green and yellow patches of dandelions. Little fragmentary crumbles of asphalt broken loose from the roadbed roll and skitter under my feet occasionally. Butterflies and bumblebees float among the wildflowers.

By early afternoon, I estimate I've covered six or seven miles down the highway, and when I see signs for the Sam Houston Parkway I decide that when I get to the onramp, I'll go over to it and try to hitch.

I get "The Hitchhiker's Song" playing in my ear, of course, and then I'm thinking about April. I originally thought April was excitingly tough, and then I got to know her and found out she was indeed excitingly tough, *and* funny, and *brilliant*. She's as intellectual as I am, really, although she uses more common vocabulary and she's a better chameleon. I want to be more

like her.

I wish I could've been with her. We're good together. She was liking me the more she got to know me. I think when you meet someone and it feels like you've got that chemistry and you start wanting that to happen, and it doesn't, you still get to have the wonderfulness of having met them and knowing they're in this world, and that's more important than the fact that it didn't happen like you'd hoped. So I hope I'll always remember her.

All of them, really. I hope they're going to be okay.

The exit signs come up. North or south? North will be first, with the southbound doing the cloverleaf on the other side of the overpass.

A smaller sign on the side of the road becomes visible as I get closer, and makes my decision for me: "JCT: Interstate 10" it says, pointing to the right for the northbound exit.

If I had a magic marker, I'd ink a blank page from the back of my notebook with my destination and hold it up against the outside of the notebook for the drivers to see. But I'm thinking the fact that I'm toting a notebook even by itself may help. People are more likely to pick you up if you have a possession with you, almost anything except maybe a paper bag with a bottle in it or a weapon. Toolbox, suitcase, flat tire, it all makes you look like a person with a purpose and a lot of people are more comfortable with that.

I hitch for about fifteen minutes before an old El Camino pulls off onto the shoulder. I walk up to the passenger's side window. "Where ya headed?", guy in baseball cap asks.

"West. Albuquerque."

"I can take you to just outside San Antonio."



Yes. Far out of their reach and well on my way.

\* \* \*

I have the driver drop me off at a truck stop close to where he switches highways. I wash up in the bathroom, getting leftover leaf crud out of my hair and off my face, then go into the restaurant portion and grab a menu. They have chili cheeseburgers and onion rings. The smell of frying onions and the sizzle of burgers on the griddle entice me. I place my order, thinking I might have to do a repeat on it, I feel like I could eat six before I started to slow down.

I need to make some plans. Call Luciana.

But after I eat.

\* \* \*

Luciana D'Urbanes is she who once said my mind makes unexpected left-hand turns without signaling, and this is why people listening to me get left behind a lot of the time.

She is also the person I'm having my first adult romantic relationship with, and although it's been a kind of ephemeral undefined thing, on-again, off-again, depending on whether I'm living in the Albuquerque vicinity or not, she's always been amazingly and totally on my side.

She's fifteen years older than me. We met because in spring of 1980, about six weeks before the UNM people tricked me into signing myself into the loony bin, I put an ad in the

Albuquerque Journal, looking for both female people who were hetero but butch and male people who were hetero but sissy, to discuss our social situation and our identities. And she was one of the few serious respondents, although she's not so much butch as dismissive of conventional expectations foisted onto girls and women.

I was a virgin back then. Well, the way virgin was usually defined, I mean. I later had a couple of lesbian acquaintances make fun of me for not questioning that definition, saying "Just what would the two of us need to do with each other to make us not virgins? Virginity is a heterocentric bullshit concept! Why should it matter if your orgasms come from fingers or tongue or toy instead of a dick in a vagina? Making a huge honking deal out of getting it in there is all about hetero sex being the only real sex, and I can't believe you buy into that!" Which was a very good point.

But that point hadn't been made to me yet in 1980 and no, I hadn't figured it out on my own. In my defense, the entire world around me *said* nothing else was as profound and spectacular, or as personal and intimate, and since it had never happened for me I had no firsthand experience to draw on.

Anyway, Luciana also considered it a bit of a big deal, to the point that, with the age gap, she didn't want to be my first. "I feel licentious enough playing around with a cute fellow who's just barely older than my oldest son, without deflowering him. That's really beyond the pale and I'd end up worrying they'd put posters about me around the schools and warn the parents, you know?"

However, in our first "off-again" interruption, when I was out in California that summer, I

lost my official patriarchally defined and heterocentrically configured virginity on a vegetarian commune, to a girl named Kay. But we didn't have an ongoing relationship. We were still relative strangers. I would have preferred to explore things further, but Kay hit the road shortly after the event in question and there was no reason... or pretext... for me tagging along.

Hence, when I was next back in the Albuquerque area, that little obstacle had been eliminated, but I was still a relationship-virgin, and Luciana was the person with whom I first explored the complicated territory of how to be a partner and handle the feelings you get with a sexual intimate you also live with and make decisions with.

There were aspects of it that were quite new to her, too, although as a mom with three kids she had obviously had some experiences along those lines. She once told me, "Friends are people you really get, people you can trust and talk to. Lovers are people you stay with because of the sex, and you put up with the rest. I always said you don't fuck your friends! This is most odd, I tell you! You are very good company but to talk with you and be with you I have to not think of you as peniled! And yet here we are. You have a delicious body, and the sex is very good, don't get me wrong. I just find it rather strange."

But mostly I was the one with a lot to learn.

\* \* \*

"Hello?", the voice on the phone says when it's picked up.

"Hey, is that Eduardo? This is Derek."

“Oh, hey. How’s it going?”

“Pretty decent. I just busted out of a loony bin, making me an escaped paranoid schizophrenic.”

“Right on, brother. Keep up the good work. You wanna talk to Luciana?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

So he calls his mom’s name and a moment later she’s on the line.

“Hey!”, she says. “It’s so good to hear from you! How are you doing, my little friend? I’ve missed you!”

“I’ve actually been in another locked institution. Long story, but I can’t believe I got conned into letting them put me in a cage again. But I’m out and in motion, and I was wondering where I ought to go. I don’t want to impose, but are you in the mood to have a visitor drop in?”

“Oh please do, I’d *love* to see you again, I want to know everything you’ve been doing!”

“Umm, also”, I add, “I told the people running the place to ship my clothes and stuff to your house. I’ll get a backpack so I can eventually take it with me.”

“Sure, you can, or you can leave it here for next time.”

“Okay, that’s great. I should be there tomorrow, give or take.”

I hang up the pay phone.

I walk over to one of the busboys and ask, “Hey, any chance I can get a magic marker and a piece of cardboard, like maybe a panel from a packing box or something?” He says he’ll see what he can do. He returns after a moment with a blue marker and several pieces of cardboard; I select one of appropriate size and ink “ALBUQ” in thick letters. Then I step back out into the

Texas sunshine.

The traffic on I-10 is very thick here, where it dives straight through the center of San Antonio; much of it is local, people using the highway to get to where they shop or work.

It isn't conducive to hitchhiking. There aren't many good places for drivers to pull off and pick someone up, and in this congestion by the time anyone sees me with my thumb out, they're already going past me. Same with the local feeder roads with their ramps going onto I-10. No one wants to leave the stream just to pick up a stranger and then have to force themselves back into the bumper-to-bumper chaos. Can't blame them.

I just have to walk through to the other side of the city. It's going to take awhile and it means moving at pedestrian speed instead of car speed, but I don't see an alternative.

I wonder what the conversation is like back at Elk Meadow. I assume they've long since noticed, even if they actually weren't watching me surreptitiously the whole time.

The other residents weren't in on it even if the staff was. I bet they'll regard my disappearance as a triumph, especially in light of them knowing about me being thrown into seclusion just for saying I wanted to leave the damn place.

Hmm, I just thought of something else weird. Once I was no longer in seclusion, I could have just grabbed a table knife from the cafeteria. I could have left that knife they had sitting out at the nurse's station right where it was, ignored it, and gotten a different one. If I'd thought of it. I wasn't exactly thinking too clearly at the time. But seriously, that makes it even weirder that they had it out there like that. *They think my behavior is weird, I'd like to know how to make*

*any sense out of theirs.*

Well, actually, I would have had to have waited until morning, the next morning, they don't leave silverware out all night in the cafeteria. In that case I'm glad that convenient little knife was right there where it was. But damned if I can figure out what it was doing there.

Coincidence seems really really unlikely. Taunting me with it seems extremely believable on the other hand, but what the hell was their end game? I mean, what did they think I would do? How is it that I'm out here? I mean, I'm oh so glad that I am, but I don't really understand how the pieces came together so nicely like that and all.

Oh, and there's all that that Mark was saying, that my parents sought out, how did Mark put it? *A place you don't belong*, ...and put me in it, on purpose. A deliberate act. *Gonna turn you into who you need to be whether you like it or not.*

*Or maybe that's a test, too. How well do you handle that situation if we put you in it, little lab rat child of mine? Uh huh. The perpetual push from my folks to be competent. At a certain point, of course, I'm testing myself anyway, whether they're setting me up for it or not.*

*My parents are both aware that I know they love me. And they're also very arrogant about it, like the intensity of their caring means they know what's best for me and I should continue to let them shape me. Well, it doesn't. Because I get to drive.*

"*A place you don't belong*", Mark said. My parents didn't urge me into a clinic for people

with eating disorders, though. They *do* think I have drug and alcohol problems. It wasn't a 'place I don't belong' in that sense. It was, however, mostly for people with more extreme addictions. What were my parents looking for? Why put me there?

*Barnes.* A charismatic anchor person with a skill for getting people to buy into the treatment plan. My parents know I'm stubborn and make up my own mind. They knew I threw a spanner into the works at Mountain View and got myself kicked out. I wasn't going to be easily coerced by an authoritarian clinic. They wanted someone who could sell me on the idea that I needed to straighten myself out and should go along with the program.

He's a really skilled manipulator and he promised them he could bring me around.

That phone call he made to me at Reggie and Melinda's. My parents called him first. Well, yeah, of course they did, how else would he have had the phone number? And I bet he wouldn't have made the effort for just anyone who had broken out of Elk Meadow.

...I think maybe my parents have more clout than I realized. Our family isn't rich and we aren't established bluebloods or anything like that, but my folks are used to having authority and getting people to take them seriously.

They were obviously planning to put me in Elk Meadow long before I got kicked out of the nursing program. It takes more than a couple days to complete the application process for a place like Elk Meadow. I didn't think about that at the time, but it's true.

Perhaps Charlie wouldn't have gotten kicked out if he'd shoved someone else in the cafeteria

instead.

\* \* \*

Up in front of me is an intersection cloverleaf with some other major highway, sign identifies it as Loop 410. I have to cross the ramp and highway traffic several times. I wait for an opening at the first ramp and then dash across. Then on the other side of the underpass, the merging traffic coming off of 410 and getting on 10. I see an opportunity coming but to my annoyance the person in the car in the near lane slows down, either attempting too late to let me go in front or because they think I'm about to dash in front of them, either way now I can't go where I was going to go. Aah, there's another gap, if that big truck doesn't speed up and close it... I time it and dash out at a car as it scoots by, crossing the near lane directly behind it and into the gap in the far lane. I'm fine and fully off on the shoulder and out of everyone's way but the truck blasts a loud airhorn honk at me anyway.

*Look, I squish easier than you do. You seriously think I'm less interested in avoiding a collision than you are?*

Ten minutes later, I'm crossing a small bridge, walking in the breakdown lane at the edge and a car coming up behind me honks when they're a few yards behind me. I jump and my foot lands on a chunk of loose rock and my ankle twists and I go down. Damn. Just what I need.



Now my ankle is sprained. Somewhat sprained. I'm still able to walk on it but slowly and it feels like it could roll out from under me again if I'm not careful.

So anyway, I wonder what the other residents are saying and how the staff is handling it? Barnes is going to have an interesting time of it, trying to make it look like he and his staff are in charge and know what they're doing. I mean, they just landed on me with jackboots and really heavy-handed stuff, tying me to a stretcher and parading me down the hall, so most of the residents, probably even including Ellen and Ronald, were thinking that was way over the top, but it also makes a big deal of the fact that Elk Meadow didn't want me to leave, right? And now I'm gone anyway. How're they going to spin that?

It *should* make them look totally incompetent and ruin everyone's faith in the idea they know what they're doing, and I hope it does exactly that, and that all the residents stop thinking they belong in that place or that these charlatans can make anything better for them, and they all just start laughing in their faces.

That place shouldn't be legal. It should be shut down. They are abusers and oppressors and they're downright evil. There's a little bit of good but it gets ruined by how the overall place is set up. I wish I had the power to put them to a stop, go in there with TV cameras and expose them, make them the object of public humiliation for what they do in there.

I'll never see any of them again, April, Valerie, Jake, Noelle, Tuyen, Ellen... I wish I could, I wish... they'd high-five me, for real, not that Irma fake morning routine stuff. They might never completely agree with me, but on this, I know they would. And I bet they talk about me for

awhile after I'm gone, you know, there was this guy before you got here, Derek, and...

*(hey check out Flouncy Derek)*

*...yeah, okay, so I'm a bit self-immersed...*

God I hope they're going to be okay. Ellen, so fragile and brittle and angry. Jake, all bluff and sure of himself. April, so smart and perceptive and brave. Valerie, hey I would have liked to have gotten to know her better... and Noelle and Tuyen... I wish I could get them all out, and away from that place, and we should have our own meetings and listen to each other and do our own psychodrama stuff and give each other feedback and notes on how we think each other is progressing, and be supportive of each other.

Oww. Damn ankle. Damn driver and his stupid horn. I can usually walk forever. I have ridiculous muscles in my legs. My calf muscles are like piano wires. When I don't walk for a few days they get tight, and I'm on my toes. That's why I bounce. That's why I skip. Well, that, and not having any reason not to.

After the first ten miles of walking, they usually get stretched and loosen up, but I still spring forward automatically, I don't have to do anything to make that happen, it's like my body was made to autowalk and all I have to do is aim it. I often do twenty miles, twenty-five miles and it's easy. I once walked over thirty miles from crack of dawn to late afternoon. I wasn't springing forward by that point, I admit, I was walking without any bounce whatsoever, kind of shuffling, but it was an efficient easy pace and I could have kept going for a whole lot longer. I've never hit my limit.

\*       \*       \*

A couple hours later, my right ankle feels like someone's carving my tendons out with a rusty saw. Each time I put weight down on that side, it stabs and gouges tears into my eyes, and makes me gasp. I'm still not out of metropolitan San Antonio and the traffic is still way heavy. I try hitching a ride anyway, but the only result is that cars and trucks keep whizzing by and I'm not making any progress any more.

I have to walk. There's no other way.

I think of the biofeedback screen. The various colored dots and the lines they leave behind them, tracking the changes. Okay, imagine one that represents the pain from your ankle, and you can see it right there. Green, red? How about blindingly brilliant violet, almost black but brighter than white...that's the color of how it feels. An eye hurting color. All right, now, step, step, bring that number down, let's just slide that right on down. Oww. Step, step. Relax. Watch that violet dot and oww relax and it will go to a lower number oooh see that's not quite so bad, a little more...

That's actually working.

Hmm, I have another idea. Here are the leads, the little plugs that go from the clips that attach to my ankles. This is where the pain signal comes in to the brain and makes that violet dot on my screen. And I'm holding those here in my hand, all right? Now I'm yanking them clean out. I know my ankle hurts like hell, but I can't afford to feel that right now. I know about it. I'll do the best I can not to damage it any worse, but I have to walk and so I have to disable the

pain signal for now. Move the violet dot to zero and leave it there.

Step, step...step... yeah... I'll be damned, that's really doing it.

\* \* \*

Another hour and a half's walking gets me out beyond the other side of Loop 410 and traffic is thinned and there's a wider shoulder. I wait there with my ALBUQ sign and my thumb out.

An old guy in a Jeep stops and picks me up. "I'm goin' to just outside of Juarez. I can let you off where I turn and you'll be close to Las Cruces", he tells me.

I buckle my seat belt, lean my head against the window, and doze off almost immediately.

\* \* \*

I get another short ride from a local and it carries me all the way into the outside perimeter of Las Cruces. Through the windshield, I see some mock-adobe residential buildings with red tile roofs and palm trees scattered around on the lawn, and I'm pretty sure those are NMSU buildings. New Mexico State University. I have the driver drop me off at the corner, and I find a pay phone outside a post office there.

After rummaging in my wallet for my list of emergency contacts, I locate the number I was supposed to call if no one from Elk Meadow met me at the Houston airport.

"Operator..."

“Hello, I’d like to place a collect call, hmm, let’s see, to Mark Raybourne at...” I give the number and wait while the operator connects and asks the hospital switchboard to transfer the call. I’m no longer in Texas, so I feel safe in doing this. It probably would have been safe from San Antonio, possibly even from Houston. I don’t know to what extent the municipal or state police would be at the beck and call of a private facility, and I hadn’t yet been committed against my will. But I know damn good and well they don’t have anything akin to extradition from New Mexico. I’m officially beyond their reach.

“Mark Raybourne speaking”

“You have a collect call from Derek Turner, will you accept the charges?”

He does.

“Derek! How are you? We were worried about you!”

“I’m doing fine, which is why I’m calling. I didn’t want anyone to worry. Including my parents if and when they learn I’m no longer there at Elk Meadow.”

“So... I take it you don’t intend to come back this time?”

“You got that right.”

“Where *are* you? Where did you go?”

“Does it matter?”

“...”, Mark pauses before replying, “...I guess it doesn’t. How did you get out of the facility?”

“I used a table knife to remove the lock plate on one of the doors.”

“Oh. I see.”

“Well... that’s all I called about. I should let you get back to your work.”

“Hey Derek... good luck”

“Thanks. You too.”

I hang up the phone.

Las Cruces is, incidentally, where my sister Jan currently lives. She’s recently married and she and her husband Randy are both college students here at New Mexico State University. And where I’m standing appears to be part of the campus. It’s early evening, and even though it’s August, there won’t be much more sunlight to hitch, and I should eat anyway. Jan might invite me over, or might be interested in eating out together. I don’t have her number among my emergency contacts, but if she’s listed...

I dial the same area code that’s printed on the pay phone dial, plus 555-1212 and ask the directory services operator for a listing for Jan or Randy Tisch, and when she rattles off the possible matches I recognize the street name.

“Hey, there”, she says when I call. I can tell from her voice she’s surprised to hear from me.

“Hi! I happen to be passing through your neck of the woods and wondered if you and Randy were free to get some pizza and hang out or anything.”

“You’re... here? In Las Cruces?”

“Yep”

“I thought you were...” she trails off.

“I was. In a rehab facility in Houston. It didn’t work out for me so I left, and I decided to

aim myself at New Mexico instead of going back to Georgia.”

“Do Mama and Daddy know?”

“I’m not sure. Elk Meadow might have called them, but the staff might have been holding their breath hoping I’d turn up somehow. I just called them to let them know I’m okay and won’t be coming back.”

“Hmm. Well, we were about to decide what to do about supper. There’s pretty decent Chinese we get takeout from pretty often, you want to come here and join us?”

“That sounds nice. I’m at... let’s see... the Corbett Center post office, and I think I’m close to campus here. Or maybe on it.”

“Yeah, you’re actually in our neighborhood. I’ll get Randy to swing by and pick you up, then y’all can get the food and come back to the apartment.”

I entertain myself looking in the windows of some of the commercial establishments sharing this parking lot until Randy drives up in a Dodge pickup.

“Hey Derek!”, he waves. I get in. We do the handshake thing.

“Check out my CB”, he says, gesturing to the brushed-aluminum electronics with the glowing red numbers occupying the center of his truck’s dash. “I’ve got a whip antenna tied down to the side of the truck bed and it’s got really good reception and forty channels. I can hear people on roads from all over.” He demonstrates, clicking the Talk button and saying “Breaker, breaker, this is that there Railroad Rambler down in Cruces just off 25, do you copy?”

We listen to static for a second. There are faint voices having conversation from far away. He repeats the request.

“Hey Railroad Rambler”, someone says back this time. “I copy. This is Red Ball. What’s cookin’?”

“Ten four, Red Ball. What’s your twenty?”

Red Ball informs us that he’s on interstate 10 heading for Arizona. Randy grins at me.

“Pretty cool, huh?”

\* \* \*

I take another packet of hot mustard and smear it on my egg roll and take another bite of kung po chicken. Jan digs another forkful of beef with bean sprouts from the bottom of her styrofoam container. Randy offers me another beer.

Jan has offered me the use of the couch in the living room to overnight on, which I appreciate.

They’ve been telling me about their engineering courses, and the problems with noise rates and some kind of tradeoff between signal power and how fast you can transmit, most of which is over my head. Like my parents, these two are hard science people, and it’s pretty much an alien world for me.

Jan beckons me to the telephone. “Mama wants to talk to you.”

I glare at her. “I asked you not to tell them I was here.” She shrugs.

“Hi”, I say into the telephone.

“What are you doing at Jan’s house? Why aren’t you still in Elk Meadow?”



“I gave it a try, I really did, but that place is as bad as the one in Albuquerque, and I had to get myself out.”

“Well, you turn right back around and go back in! You’ve got real problems and they need to be fixed if you’re ever going to function in the real world.”

“That’s not happening.”

“You have nowhere to go. You can’t come here and you aren’t welcome at Mother and Daddy’s, not until you get yourself straightened out.”

“I have a place to go. I’m going to be staying at Luciana’s until I figure out what to do next.”

“I already told the hospital to ship all your stuff to us here instead. You won’t have any clothes or anything and we’re not giving you any money.”

“I’ll get some stuff from the thrift store, and I’ll get a job of some sort.”

“I’m not giving you a choice! We paid a lot of money...”

For the first time in my life, I hang up on one of my parents, replacing the receiver in its cradle.

It rings a couple seconds later. Jan fields the call. This time I tell her I refuse to speak with either of my folks. Jan relays this information, and after a couple more sentences back and forth the call ends.

“Now... about me staying here and sleeping on your couch”, I say. “I need to know that it’s really okay and you don’t mind. I also need to know there won’t be any hospital ambulances coming up the driveway to try to take me somewhere for my own good.”

Jan sighs. “No one’s going to do that. I told Mama you can’t make someone do therapy if

they're not willing. She's really mad but if she can't get you to go back to that place you were in, she's not going to try to get you locked up somewhere else."

"You sure about that?"

"If someone shows up at our door, we won't let them in and we'll tell them there's no such person here. Promise."

= August 5, 1982 (Second Day After) =

Jan feeds me breakfast and I'm on the side of Interstate 25 before 9:30. I catch rides that bring me into Albuquerque by midafternoon.

Luciana greets me at the door. "Oh. look at you, you're all sunburned, does it sting? Oh it is so good to see you! Well, come on in! Tell me everything!"

So I do.

= April 9, 1983 (Eight Months and Five Days After) =

I drape my stethoscope over the back of Luciana's couch and peel out of my work scrubs and put on jeans and a t shirt. "Marjorie is feeling better", I tell her. "I think those patches the doctor ordered for her are helping."

"Oh, I'm so glad. She sounds like a real trooper, you know. I hope when it's my turn, I'll be brave. I'm afraid I won't be."

Marjorie is one of my hospice clients. I've been working for a home health aide organization that supplies services to terminal patients. The pay is not great but it's steady. I'm able to contribute something here and be a part of Luciana's household. I even get to make use of a lot of the stuff I learned in nursing school. I continue to think that caring for people on a physical basis is not a likely long-term career for me, but for now it pays the rent. Or helps towards paying it at any rate.

I still don't have a clear sense of what I want to do with my life. Well, actually, yes I do, I want to grab the world by its collective lapels and shake it and tell people a few things about life and gender and rights, and how society needs to change. But I don't know how to go about doing that. How to be an effective social activist.

"Oh", Luciana exclaims. "I forgot. Somebody called for you while you were out. I took down his name and number."

She hands me a slip of paper. Mark Raybourne.

I dial.

"Raybourne speaking"

"Hello, this is Derek Turner. You called and left a message asking me to call back?"

"Hey there. Yes... just wanted to see how you're doing... everything going all right for you nowadays?"

"Not perfect, but pleasant and stable and I'm pretty happy overall."

"Well...that's as good as anyone could ask for, I guess. I wanted to ask you something, if you don't mind?"

“Uh, sure, you can ask.”

“How, exactly, did you get out of Elk Meadow when you made your departure?”

Bloody hell. So... you’re waiting for me to acknowledge that a certain table knife was left out for me to make use of. I mean, I’ve already answered this question. Which is a question that shouldn’t have needed to be asked the *first* time. I left behind the merchandise I dismantled from the damn door, left it on the floor all neatly laid out like an assembly diagram. Practically like signing the feat. An arrogant Flounchy Derek signature. You folks can’t be finding the method *itself* confusing. You’re asking me to address the part of it that hasn’t been spoken of so far. Aren’t you?

To what end, Mark Raybourne? Is this where you say ‘See, we *let* you leave. You said you wanted to leave and we made it so that you could, if you really wanted to’?

Then what? ‘So how about you come on back, and we’ll do more psychodrama and really dig into those communications issues you wanted to work on’?

Or is it more ‘Whatever you think about us, you’re dead wrong that we’re all coercive and oppressive and that you had to escape to get out. Because all we did was make sure you wanted out bad enough to take the risk’?

Or maybe it’s true confession time? ‘The thing of it is, Derek, we expected to prove to you that you *didn’t* really want to leave. We put that knife out there so that when you didn’t use it, you’d realize way down deep that you’d chosen to stay. We didn’t expect you to actually use it and leave us sitting here looking stupid’.

Or who knows? Sometimes things just happen in your favor, coincidences included. I said I

could use a knife, and one was given to me; and although I lost control over it, it conveniently got put where I could reclaim and use it anyway.

Or... they found it, suspected I'd been planning to use it in some way if I could, but after I rescinded my letter and was no longer in seclusion, they were thinking of it — not just the knife but the whole thing about me being in seclusion, I mean — as past tense, and let their guard down.

Or maybe the nurses were somehow in on it and took my side.

I'm never really going to know, am I?

The interesting thing, though, Mark Raybourne, is that you folks over there in Elk Meadow are wondering what happened that day, too. You're calling me to ask more questions about it. That makes me think it didn't go the way it was planned.

The way *you* planned it, Dr. Barnes. You're actually bewildered, and just as obsessed as I am, so you're asking Mark to call me and see what he can find out.

In poker, if you get someone to fold instead of plopping down the money to call, it's my understanding that they're not entitled to see what cards you were actually holding.

"Whatever do you mean, Mark?", I finally say into the phone.

"Well, I just meant... I was curious about your recollection of how it was, exactly, that you got out of Elk Meadow. The doors were all locked."

Oh yes, you're totally fishing for it. You're waiting for me to tell you that I know a table

knife was put at my disposal and that I've been curious about why.

"Were they now? Well, I didn't find that to be too much of a barrier. Maybe you should pay more attention to the locks on your doors. Wouldn't want any of those dangerous people to be able to get out, or anything."

"Umm, I see. Well... I just, uh... it's good to know you're doing okay..."

"I am. Anything else?"

"I don't guess so. Well, take care..."

"You too."

The phone makes a soft *clack* as I restore the receiver to the hook.