

## Irene Mock / INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOUR

Several months before she stopped working on the psych ward, Ellie dreamed she was in the Quiet Room. At first she thought it was the Operating Room because the light from the ceiling was so bright and the room so cold. Ellie felt sick, as if she'd been given an anaesthetic, though she couldn't think of what kind of operation she'd had. Then something changed and the wall turned into a window with bars. She saw the thick steel door open and Liz came in, and behind her, Joan, the head nurse. It wasn't clear just what they were going to do to her.

The next morning at work when she told them her dream, the two nurses laughed.

"That's ridiculous. Why would we ever put you in Room 11?" Liz lit a cigarette, blew smoke rings in the air.

Joan was quiet. "Honestly, Ellie," she said shaking her head.

There are times now, months after leaving the psych ward, that Ellie thinks of the dream. Just what were Liz and Joan about to do? Anything she tries to imagine seems absurd.

"This is a modern ward," the head nurse proudly told her a year ago at her job interview. They didn't use shock treatments and gave medication only when necessary. "What I'm looking for," Joan said, "is someone who cares about people."

The Quiet Room was at the end of the hall. It had two doors. The outer door, number 11, displayed the word "SECLUSION" in white letters on a brown Formica plaque. When it was unlocked, you stepped into a small antechamber. Inside was a basin and seatless toilet. The second door was made of thick steel with a key lock, bolt and peephole. When Ellie stood in front of the steel door her first week on the ward, she heard a voice calling for help.

Joan said: "Liz, you carry the tray. Ellie, you empty the urinal bottle. I'll do the talking."

Liz's tray held a small plastic medicine cup and a hypodermic needle; Joan carried a blood pressure cuff. Neither looked like nurses. Liz, tall and blonde, wore a silk blouse, beige skirt and suede heels. Joan wore a modest navy pant suit and gold cross at her neck. Ellie, who'd hoped to develop rapport with the patients in her casual sweater and corduroy pants, had been mistaken by the janitor that morning for a new admission.

Looking through the peephole in the door, Joan said, "He's not on the mattress." She turned to Liz; their eyes met. Joan nodded and turned back to the steel door.

"Harold," she said firmly, "Would you lie down? Please lie down on your mattress."

Suddenly Liz jumped to one side, nearly tripping over Ellie's feet.

"Sorry, didn't mean to alarm you," Liz said. "I just thought I saw his hand reach through the food tray hole."

"The what?" Ellie's legs felt like rubber. Liz pointed to their feet. At the bottom of the steel door was a hole about six inches high, wide enough for a hospital food tray.

"Don't get too near that hole. If he's not on the mattress he might grab you," Liz said. "There've been people who could get half their body through it."

"Half a body?" Ellie stared at Liz, wondering if she was joking. "You mean an arm?" she said. "Or maybe a leg?"

"Shhhh." Joan looked through the peephole. "Could you two be quiet?" She put a finger to her lips, then motioned for Ellie to join her.

Ellie stood back from the food tray hole and squinted with her eye against the tiny peephole. The body on the mattress was distorted, as though seen in a convex circus mirror. She took a deep breath to calm herself, trying to remember what she knew about Harold — which was virtually nothing.

Ellie had graduated from nursing school with a whopping student loan to pay off and felt fortunate to get the job. Initially, she'd had

misgivings. She'd heard stories about what went on in psych wards. She tried to tell Joan at the interview that she had little experience in psychiatry, but the head nurse only shrugged. "You strike me as an honest, caring person. If my intuition's correct, patients will feel that way too."

Patients took to Ellie immediately. They confided in her over games of cards. They laid bare their life histories while crocheting afghans. Each day Ellie learned to bake something new — scones, sweet rolls, cream puffs. She started to macramé plant hangers. Soon she was knitting socks. The psych ward wasn't like other wards. Nurses didn't wear uniforms. They didn't change beds, give bedpans or do sterile dressings.

There were, however, endless forms to fill out. Every detail of patients' lives had to be noted — how they ate, slept, participated, met goals the nurses set. The charts followed a formula — problem, goal, plan, outcome — but most problems were as simple as loneliness.

Liz and Joan liked the paperwork. Both spent hours in the nurse's station while Ellie sat with the patients. And then one morning, as Joan was finishing a patient's chart, Ellie asked if they could talk.

"I'm really enjoying the ward. The only thing is . . ." Ellie hesitated. "Isn't there something more I should be doing?"

"Don't worry, you're doing fine," Joan told her. "Still, strange you should mention this. Just a minute ago Liz and I were talking. There's been some trouble with Harold in the Quiet Room. We weren't going to ask you, you're so new. But we could use your help."

"The guy in Room 11?"

"Not to worry." Joan smiled encouragingly. "Just take a look at his chart and you'll be fine."

21-year-old patient admitted for having premonitions. Feels state of moods correspond to tensions in world politics, e.g. recent 'space war' in Middle East. Follows news on transistor radio incessantly, analyzing it.

This wasn't the whole story, Ellie thought. Harold hadn't attacked anybody. He hadn't jumped off a bridge. Why lock him up?

Liz thought it had to do with Harold's radio. When she took it away during his admission, saying she'd put it in the nurse's station for safe-keeping, Harold became frantic. He had told her the only reason



he kept it on low was so it wouldn't bother anyone. He actually screamed at her, "Is it a crime to keep a radio on low?"

Ellie asked why Liz hadn't simply returned the radio. Liz laughed. "You really think that radio was on? Come on, kiddo, he's listening to voices."

Spends time listening to radio which does not appear to be on. Apparently hallucinating.

Below Liz's words, the head nurse had written: Denies hallucinating.

"We ask everyone who comes in 'Do you hallucinate? Do you have delusions?' If the patient says no," Joan told Ellie, "just record denies on the chart."

"But if you write denies," she said, "doesn't it sound like they're not telling the truth? What if Harold isn't hallucinating?"

"Everyone writes denies, Ellie." Joan's tone was blunt. "It's standard practice."

The Quiet Room was cold and smelled of urine. A few pink tissues which had been used to try to wipe it up lay shredded on the floor. Ellie went to open the window, but it was block glass behind bars.

Joan said, "We want to take your blood pressure. Then we'll give you something to calm down."

She wrapped the cuff around Harold's arm. Harold moved on the mattress.

"Hey, what's this you're giving me?"

He spoke slowly, as if in a daze. He was small-boned and slender, with dark eyes and dark hair pulled back in a ponytail.

"Your blood pressure is fine." Joan ripped the cuff off his arm. "Now we want you to take your medication." She signalled with her eyes for Liz to bring the cup of liquid.

"Hey, wait a minute," said Harold.

"We want you to take this," Joan said.

"I'm not going to." Harold jerked his head away.

"I'll get a mop," Ellie said.

"A mop?" Joan looked perplexed.

"A mop. Yes, a mop," Ellie heard herself babble. The light from

the ceiling made her head ache. The smell of urine made her dizzy.  
"When I see a mess like this —"

"Shouldn't you empty the bottle first?" Joan said.

"The bottle? Oh yes, the bottle." Ellie picked up the urinal bottle which had overflowed and took it to the toilet in the antechamber. She turned on the tap and slowly and repeatedly rinsed the bottle.

When she returned, Harold was on his stomach. Liz put the used syringe on her tray.

"So, you think we should just let him out?" Dr. Cooper asked Ellie back in the nurse's station.

Dr. Cooper stared at her. He was in his fifties and wore a black shirt under a blue jacket. Earlier that week the psychiatrist had introduced himself. "Call me Barry," he said, lifting her hand as if to kiss it. Now Ellie wasn't sure whether she could tell him what was on her mind.

"About Harold. Would you say his behaviour was appropriate?" Dr. Cooper asked.

Ellie frowned. She shrugged. "Just what do you mean by appropriate?"

Dr. Cooper took a pink sheet of paper off a shelf labelled "Emergency Commitments." On the back of the paper he wrote schizophrenia, underlined once, and below it behaviour, underlined twice; then a list:

- a) inappropriate
- b) manneristic
- c) unpredictable
- d) regressive

He put the list in front of her on the table and said, "Well? Which category would you say he falls into?"

Ellie looked up at the ceiling and laughed. "Are you serious?"

Dr. Cooper said, "Come on, if you don't know, take a guess."

"Is he dangerous? Is that why he's in there?"

"Oh no, not dangerous, just a bit muddled," Dr. Cooper replied.

"But I don't understand," Ellie said. "You wrote paranoid schizophrenia on his chart."

"Well, we need an admitting diagnosis."

"But Seclusion?"

Dr. Cooper shrugged. "This is an open ward. He tried to run away once. We're afraid he might again."

"But he's twenty-one, an adult, and if he hasn't committed any crime . . . ."

"Actually, Ellie, it's not that simple. He's so unpredictable we don't know what to do. We're babysitting."

"Babysitting?"

"I'm afraid that's all we can do under the circumstances," Dr. Cooper said. "When the police picked him up at a peace demonstration, Harold was soliciting donations for an organization that doesn't exist. The police confiscated the money. Harold put up a fuss. He'll tell you the organization exists, he only made a mistake in the wording. He also thinks the police took a thousand dollars from him, if you can believe that."

"But you can't just keep him in there . . . ." Ellie shook her head. Dr. Cooper was taking his time, being patient.

But then: "Maybe you're right. Maybe we should let him out anyway," Dr. Cooper said. "They get the idea they're being punished when you keep them in there too long."

"Cut out and paste things that have meaning to you. We'll talk about them later," Liz instructed the Awareness Group the following day while Ellie passed out sheets of white paper and magazines. But Ellie, working on her own collage, soon tired of Kraft cheese slices, Campbell's soup, dog food and cats. She started cutting out slogans. SHAPE UP! KEEP FIT! She glanced at Harold's blank paper.

"Here, try these." Ellie passed him two slogans: NO COMMITMENTS! NO KIDDING!

Harold smiled. "Thank you. I needed that."

"No problem. Any time," Ellie laughed.

She supposed Harold thought she was the one who'd gotten him out of the Quiet Room. She felt flattered. He was attractive; he had a wonderful smile. There was a mischievous gleam in his eyes when he talked, and he talked constantly; he had theories about everything.



"Say today is Monday," he said, "and the rule this morning is you've got to do everything with your left hand."

Harold shifted the scissors from his right hand to his left.

"This is a schizophrenic story, a left-handed story."

He told her his dog's name was Rebecca. She was four years old and had black hair. He and the dog thought about each other, but he knew she hated him because she yapped all the time.

"I didn't love her enough to train her, even though she's four years old," Harold said. "You see, Rebecca's half-wild because her father's name was Danny, and he was a wild dog. She's also a half-breed Venusian."

He looked at Ellie and smiled.

"You're beautiful," he said suddenly.

"What?"

"I mean it. The moment I saw you I knew you'd help me."

He took Ellie's hand. His was warm, and when she looked into his dark eyes Ellie felt a warm glow. She glanced across the room and wondered if Liz was watching. From a distance she heard a pen tapping the counter, Liz calling, "Could everyone please hold up your paper now and describe it? Could you all please stop."

Harold squeezed her hand, then let go of it. When he held up his paper, Ellie could tell Liz was not pleased.

Liz shook her head at him, but once they'd gone around the circle she seemed to have forgotten why.

"What shall we do tomorrow? How about a debate?" Liz asked. "Any ideas?"

Afterwards, in the nurse's station, Liz kept her back to Ellie, pursing her lips. Ellie wondered if Liz was still upset because of the slogans. She asked if anything was the matter, but Liz wouldn't say.

"Look, be honest," Ellie told her.

"Okay," Liz said. "I was wondering what you were doing with Harold. I saw you talking in the Activity Room. Then holding hands."

"Don't you ever touch patients?" Ellie asked.

Liz laughed, then said, "If it's just chitchat, I don't see any problem."

"Well, that's all it is," Ellie told her.

"Okay. But chitchat can soon turn into problems. If you know what I mean."

"What kinds of problems?" Ellie asked.

Liz shook her head. "All kinds, kiddo. You'll see."

That was the night of Ellie's dream. The next morning, for the first time, Joan assigned Ellie to give out medications. "To take your mind off things."

All morning Ellie felt something about to go wrong. She tried not to think of her dream. Carrying her tray, she called "Pill-time!" the way she had seen Liz and Joan do. The patients assembled in the day room. To Ellie, their voices seemed happy, nearly euphoric:

"I'm only on 25 mgms."

"Well, I'm on 50."

"She only gets 10 — can you imagine!"

And so on. Were they boasting, Ellie thought, or voicing some kind of complaint? She handed them their pills in a Lily cup.

"Harold?" she called. "Harold, where are you?"

No sign of him in the TV room or Activity Room. Nor in the consultation room or kitchen. Standing with her pill tray, Ellie looked out the large day room window.

"How clever of them, to make you look like a waitress."

The voice behind her was low, muffled and strange. Turning around, Ellie was startled to see him. "Oh there you are," she said brightly. "Only two pills for you this morning!"

Harold came closer. Ellie wasn't sure of the look in his eyes. She watched him carefully. What was this, some kind of joke?

"Well then, here, sir, are your jelly beans!" Ellie tried to laugh. She held the Lily cup out to him with a smile.

His eyes narrowed, his body stiffened. "I don't like the food you carry on your tray."

Food? Was he hallucinating? "Look, if you have any dietary complaints," she said, imitating the calm, reasonable nurse's voice she'd heard Liz use, "I'm sure the kitchen staff will listen. But these are pills."



"Can I have my cigarettes now? Can I have my razor?" he said quietly, the words monotone.

Why was he talking like this? Ellie felt her face flush; she was beginning to sweat.

She took a ball from the ping-pong table nearby. "The doctor's just prescribed this. I know it's hard to swallow, but do the best you can."

"You think you're cute, don't you?" he said in a whisper. "You really think you're different from the rest." Ellie tried to talk to him, but he knocked the tray out of her hands.

"It's poison! Poison!" he screamed at her. "You'll make me sick!"

Tuesdays were bridge. Wednesdays were sing-songs. Thursday was bowling, but only when the patients were good. Harold was back in Room 11.

"I told him he'd be allowed out of the room as soon as we gave him his clothes," said Dr. Cooper.

"Oh," laughed Liz, "and what did he say?"

"He said he didn't need his clothes. In fact, he was beginning to feel better already without them. He suggested I take off my clothes, that all the nurses take off their clothes. He said walking around in pyjamas could make a world of difference to how you were feeling."