

Why Do Our Feelings Have Feelings?

Daniel counted smoke breaks among his favorite times, when he could get his nicotine fix and mind-travel along with the residents all in the name of milieu therapy. He gazed out past the wire fence that bordered the Tri-City courtyard, beyond the ochre layer of smog hanging over the inland valley, to the San Bernardino Mountains. He liked to imagine himself up there in a ski lift, releasing frosty breaths into a clear blue sky. Instead, he blew smoke rings, thankful that the anti-smoking forces hadn't yet conquered inpatient psych units. One of the perks of his counseling internship that he would miss, he supposed, after he completed grad school and landed a job in more professional setting.

Next to him, Debbie kept chattering away about how she didn't used to smoke, how it's Kool Lights now and she only smokes three-fourths, never to the filter. How it drives Art nuts but she tells him it's her money. Actually, her parents' money but they're pretty well off—not rich enough to afford private, though— well, she was in private for two years, but they had to spend it all down or something like that.

Then abruptly changing the subject, she blurted, “Art thinks you're going to go after me as soon as he leaves.”

“Go after you?” Daniel flicked ash into one of the battered, turquoise-painted coffee cans that dotted the courtyard patio.

“Yeah, like hit on me.”

“Well you know that's not true.” An involuntary laugh almost slipped out, and Daniel quickly dragged on his cigarette to cover it. He scanned the courtyard checking in

on the other residents, most of whom were likewise puffing away and staring out into space: Eleanor doing her “facial exercises”—a coverup for tardive dyskinesia; Joe leaning against the wall, stiff as a cardboard cut-out; and the new guy wearing a stamp of King Tut between his eyebrows. The few non-smokers took advantage of the morning sun, laying across sparse patches of dry grass, arms slung over faces to shade their eyes.

“You mean you don’t like me?” Debbie interrupted Daniel’s thoughts.

He exhaled a long stream of smoke. “Now, Debbie, of course I *like* you, but I can’t be after you.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m staff and you’re a resident. It’d be unprofessional and I’d lose my job. Speaking of which, I need to circulate.” He waved in the direction of the other residents. “I’ll be back soon.”

Daniel circled the patio trying to elicit some sort of response from the residents, with little success. Milton, wearing furry cat ears, waved him off with a scowl and a jet of smoke from his nostrils. Eleanor dragged on her Pall Mall between facial grimaces, laughing at random intervals. The rest refused eye contact, staring at the ground and flicking ash. Daniel headed back toward Debbie. On his return, she picked up the conversation as if he’d never left.

“But what if I weren’t a resident and you weren’t a staff? Like if I was on the outside and you didn’t already know I was psycho? Would you go after me then?”

“Well, Debbie, that’s getting pretty hypothetical, but I’d still have to say no.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re already in a committed relationship,” he answered. He inhaled and watched the glowing end of his cigarette flare.

Daniel took pride in the professionalism of his answer. How Art and Debbie fawned over each other actually made him slightly nauseous, or if he were really honest, jealous. Not jealous of Art, but of the connection he sustained with Debbie. Despite all the obstacles that chronic schizophrenia imposed on any kind of relationship, those two transmitted a strong bond of love that seemed to be felt by everyone around them. Just thinking about it started a bit of acid reflux. Daniel didn’t really want to admit he felt any rivalry with Art. He knew that with Debbie’s level of illness, a relationship with her would never work. He knew it went against professional ethics, and his own sense of himself. Still, he found himself drawn toward her in a way he wished he weren’t, unsettled by what it might mean about him.

“You don’t think I’m pretty enough for you, do you?” Debbie bit her wobbling lower lip. “I’m too tall, huh? I know I’m big-boned, like they say in the magazines.”

Daniel pressed his lips together, holding back words to buy time for a well-crafted answer. Part of the problem was that Debbie was actually attractive—tall, athletic build, with high cheekbones, bright blue eyes, and a killer smile on the rare occasions she let it show. Her habit of flicking her long brown hair over her shoulder and tucking it behind her ears was endearing, almost sexy. Daniel took a deep breath in through his nose, and exhaled slowly.

“Debbie, didn’t you hear what I just said?” he finally replied.

“About being a staff? Everyone knows that staff-resident thing isn’t really true. You should see what it’s like on nights and weekends!”

“Aren’t the supervisors making rounds?”

“Making rounds? Oh, that’s what you call it?”

Debbie mashed out her cigarette against the side of the can. “I guess I’m not just ugly, I’m stupid, too. I don’t even care if you like me or not.” She strode across the dusty yard to the Plexiglas door leading back into the building and yanked it open, causing an audible vacuum gasp.

Daniels’ stomach shot another stream of acid up through his esophagus. Should I run after her, he debated, or let her cool down? He decided to take a few puffs and gather his thoughts, but the smoke in his mouth soured as he watched the door close behind Debbie. He dropped his cigarette to the pavement and snuffed it out with his foot.

Daniel always dismissed the occasional rumblings about illicit activity with the night staff as rumors. Everyone who worked at Tri-City knew the place was a glossy shithole, and that a greedy, family monopoly shouldn’t be in the business of psychiatric care. But he wanted to believe that the basic standards of care and resident protections were followed. Still, sexual abuse wasn’t unheard of in these settings, and it pained him to consider that Debbie might be telling the truth.

Beyond bringing it to his supervisor, he felt unsure what to do with Debbie’s allegation. He had little hope that the administrative response would be anything but feigned concern and subsequent dismissiveness. Like most of the counseling interns at Tri-City, Daniel tried to do the best job possible under the circumstances, but was limited by his position.

When the break horn sounded, everyone rubbed out their smokes and shuffled back inside. Daniel walked down the hall looking for Debbie. He peered into the resident

lounge and found Art instead, whacking a ping pong ball across the table toward June, an obese woman with gargantuan, free-swinging breasts and a powerful backhand. In contrast to June's mountainous presence, Art, flailed his gangly arm waving the paddle like a comic speech bubble, shouting "WHAM! BAM! POW!!"

"Hey, Art," Daniel said.

June, surprisingly nimble for her size, slammed the ball past Art's paddle.

"Thanks a lot, Daniel," Art snapped. "Nice way to make me miss my shot."

Daniel held up a peace sign. "Sorry, man. I just wondered if you'd seen Debbie pass by."

"Phhht," Art snorted. "As if I'd tell you where my girl is."

His girl. What Debbie saw in Art completely mystified Daniel. Scrawny, pasty and at least a head shorter than her, he was no looker. Not to mention the outsized mutton chops, the scraggly mustache that he stroked and chewed, and his endless supply of bad band t-shirts. And to top it off, there were the public displays of affection—Art sporting hickeys like they were tats. What could be more revolting?

Art was transitioning to the Bridges Board and Care next week. The review board had agreed that Art didn't belong in a psych unit. He was a Borderline and former addict who'd learned how to work the system. He kept clean and sober, but knew when to act nuts enough to keep off the streets and out of jail. The only truly crazy thing about him was that he wanted to live among psychotics, but even that had a twisted logic. While other residents battled auditory and visual hallucinations, Art retained enough of his faculties to swindle them out of cigarettes and pass privileges. Nearly everyone wanted him gone except Debbie.

Daniel hoped that without Art around as a constant crutch, Debbie could focus more on her own progress. Between the outpatient therapy, 12-step groups, and the part-time job at Westy's Fastburger they'd arranged for him, Art would be plenty busy. Apart from the inappropriate attraction he harbored for Debbie, Daniel cared deeply for her in a professional way. He truly wanted to see her improve, to find a way to help her make some therapeutic breakthroughs, no matter how small. He wanted to bring skill and insight to the job to make a difference in this dump of a facility.

Daniel walked away fast down the long corridor, nicknamed "The Yellow Submarine," for its golden walls flanked by dozens of doors on either side. He hurried past the TV lounge and the locked double doors that separated the administrative offices from the residential area. He finally found her in the Arts and Crafts room, hunched over a vinyl-covered table with her hair dripping and wet paper towels draping her shoulders. She was working on something involving Popsicle sticks and yarn. From the other side of the accordion-pleated divider separating the rec room from the dining hall, came the clanging of industrial pots and pans, and through the narrow crack where the two sides of the divider latched in the middle, wafted the scent of steamed broccoli, Bisquik and chipped beef.

"Hey, Debbie." Daniel pulled up a paint-spattered chair with tennis balls spliced over the feet.

She kept winding the thick rainbow yarn into a kite shape that Daniel recognized as one of those God's Eyes he'd made in summer camp as a kid.

"I'm really sorry for hurting your feelings."

She wrapped the bright colors over and under, then flipped the sticks to go around again.

“It’s okay,” she said, looking up. “I’m just feeling super-insecure about Art leaving. I mean, what if he finds a cute, normal girl on the outside?”

Debbie’s thick brown eyebrows rose and fell in a way that reminded Daniel of falcons in flight. He scootched his chair closer.

“Debbie, I know the idea of Art leaving is scary to you, but he’ll only be six blocks away. You can go over and see him on your walk pass. It’ll be a good incentive for you to get out.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that, Daniel. I doubt I’ll ever make it to Bridges. Besides, it’s not like they’d ever let us live together.” The God’s Eye pulled into a lopsided parallelogram as she tugged the yarn too hard. She frowned and flipped a dripping lock from her forehead, tucking it behind her ear.

“Is that what’s bothering you the most? That he’ll find someone else?”

“I guess, but the main thing is, well, I hear voices, you know. . .” Debbie paused before adding, “in the mind?”

Daniel nodded and waited for her to continue, marveling at her ability to say this as if she were revealing a big secret, even though she repeated the line at least five times a day.

“And . . .?” he prompted.

“Well, they never shut up and they’re so *mean*. They’re always bossing me around and telling me to do awful things, and if I don’t do what they say they just get louder and meaner.”

“What kinds of things do they tell you to do?”

“Like to put my head in the toilet. It’s so unfair. Why do I have to listen to them?”

Daniel looked from her wet hair to the soggy paper towels. Oh God, he thought, making the connection. He shifted his gaze around the room, at the macramé hanging from the walls, the shelves of supplies: tempera paints and plaster-of-Paris statuettes awaiting coats of color. He returned his focus to Debbie’s face, her blue eyes blinking and welling.

“So that’s why your hair is wet?” he asked, his voice softening.

Debbie nodded. “That’s the thing. Art gets the voices to leave me alone for a while and when he goes, I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

This information brought a wave of stomach juice up to the back of his throat, green and bitter. Now Art was beating him on the therapeutic level, too? Daniel knew this unfounded jealousy was a stupid, juvenile response, but there it was. He felt inadequately understanding Debbie’s auditory hallucinations. He knew were they different from thoughts, the way they came to her from outside her head through her ears, but inaudible to others. He had occasionally experienced hearing his own name called clearly, and turning around to find nobody there, but wasn’t that a common human experience? And sometimes his thoughts came on loud and strong—flashbacks of loud domestic arguments from childhood, but he knew that his parents weren’t really there. He wanted true empathy for the residents, but relating too well made him feel like he should be locked up among them. He swallowed this dangerous feeling down hard and the lump in his throat shifted down his digestive tract.

The industrial mixer started up from the kitchen, followed by shouts for more potatoes and Parkay, and stirred Daniel back to the moment.

“Art gets rid of the voices?” he asked.

“Yeah, totally”

“Wow. How does he do that?”

“He just whispers in my ear and tells them to shut the F--- up”

“Have you ever tried that yourself? Not whisper in your own ear, of course, but talk back to the voices out loud?”

“Oh no, I don’t like saying the F-word. Anyways, I did try once and they made me wash my dirty mouth.”

“Hmm. Have you ever noticed if they turn on or off at certain times?”

“In the mind? Oh gosh, I don’t know. I hear them all the time.”

“Really? Every single minute?”

She looked Daniel straight in the eye. “Every minute that Art’s not there. Anyways, I did the other thing they told me, so maybe they’ll stop a while.” She handed Daniel a folded sheet of lined paper.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a list. I just wrote what the voices told me to.”

Daniel opened the paper and scanned the contents. The writing progressed from a neat block-print list to a scrawled paragraph.

QUESTIONS OF DEBBIE

Why do our feelings give us feelings and how does that happen??????

EXAMPLES:

1. *Why do we freeze with fear?*
2. *Why does music give us chills?*
3. *What makes you cold or warm-hearted or heavy-hearted or light-hearted?*
4. *Why do we get that sinking feeling??*
5. *Why do we feel a weight on our shoulders?*

Daniel folded the page back up. He thought of that horrible 70's song, "Feelings, whoa-whoa whoa, Feelings. . ." It had to be one of the ten worst tunes of all times. Still, the questions pierced him like small cactus needles, the kind that look harmless when you brush against them, but worm their way through the surface and burn with every move. And Daniel had his own questions for the list: Why do we say we "can't get in touch" with our feelings or "I can't put my finger on it?" Because that's exactly what was going on with him-- he just couldn't exactly put his finger on why he suddenly felt so unsettled about his future. Maybe something to do with overidentifying but he still couldn't articulate why it mattered.

"Well?" Debbie looked at him, blinking and waiting.

"These are some pretty interesting questions. I'm not really sure how to answer them."

Debbie dropped her chin toward her chest, rocking back and forth.

"But I can certainly try to help you do some research," Daniel added quickly,

Debbie raised her red-rimmed eyes, "Would you, Daniel? Please?" She dabbed her nose on the God's Eye leaving a glistening trail.

Daniel grabbed a paper towel from the table and held it out. Debbie reached for it and blew until her nose was red and swollen.

"Thanks, Daniel," she said. "Sorry for the meltdown."

Just then, Art came strolling into the room. His giant horseshoe belt buckle practically swaggered by itself above the fly of his hip-hugger jeans. He took one look at Debbie and began shouting.

“What did he say to you, Deb?” He leaned into Daniel’s. “What did you fucking do to make my girl cry?”

Debbie reached between them, laying a hand on Art’s chest. “Honey, it’s okay. I was just telling Daniel how much I’m going to miss you.” She placed her palm on Art’s cheek, guided his eyes to hers, and gave him a peck on the lips.

“You’re a lucky man, Art,” Daniel said, forcing friendliness.

“I’m the lucky one,” said Debbie, caressing Art’s cheek. “I was telling Daniel how worried I am about you finding someone else when you get out.”

“Someone else?” Art shook his head. “Debs, you know there’s nobody else I want. I’m the one who’s worried about the guys here going after you the minute I walk out the door. Staff included.” He jerked his thumb toward Daniel.

“Art! Daniel isn’t like that.” Debbie protested. “And anyways don’t you trust me?” Her lip began to wobble again.

“Oh Debs, I *do* trust you. I’m just freaky-deeking about this whole Board and Care thing, and not getting to see you all day.”

“It’s okay, Art. I’m the one who needs to be more trusting. Don’t worry about Daniel though. He’s a good guy. I wish you two knew each other better, so you’d see that you’re not all that different.”

Art and Daniel cringed simultaneously.

“Come here, funny bunny,” Debbie said, and in a split-second she and Art were twining tongues.

“Alright, you two, I’m glad you feel better.” Daniel said. “See you at group later.” He walked to the nursing station where he fished Debbie’s note from his pocket, and read the rest:

6. *How does hearing things make you crazy?*
7. *Like if dogs can hear things we can’t hear, why can’t some people hear things that other people can’t? And how do fillings play radio waves? Why is it crazy to hear voices in your head but not crazy to turn on a TV or radio and have voices come out? With so much radio and TV, how do the doctors know we aren’t picking up conversations for real, not just in the mind? What if you just started hearing voices or bells ringing one day and they didn’t go away months and months. Wouldn’t that make you go insane?*

Art was checking himself out in the full-length mirror next to Grooming Room #2. Lavonne, one of the Psych Aides peered out from behind the Plexiglass window of the nursing station. She started to reach for the microphone to make an announcement through the overhead speakers, but stopped to listen in on Art, clearly amused.

“Damn mirrors ain’t worth the fuzzy towels they wiped ‘em with,” Art grouched.

It was true, the grooming room mirrors were thin sheets of metal coated with reflective paint. Art smoothed his sideburns down around the margins with his thumb like he was shaping up a burger patty. When he appeared satisfied, he flicked the end of his stringy ponytail and practiced for his first day at work.

“How dee ya do? “How d’ya doo? Nice to meet ya. Y’all.”

“Um, Art,” Daniel called from the nurses’ station, “You know Westy’s isn’t really Western. It’s just named after some old guy Westy.”

Art stopped. “They ain’t?”

“No, so you can probably lose the accent.”

“You sure?”

“Positive,” Daniel answered, leaving the nursing station to come closer. “You know, Art, you’ve got nothing to worry about with Debbie. You heard her— she’s more worried that you’re going to forget her.”

“Well I’d be crazy to do that,” said Art. “I mean more than crazy,” he added quickly, “not just mentally ill but insane.”

“Uh huh,” Daniel said. “Well, just remember that she’s the one who’s being left behind. It’s going to be hard on her. I’m her therapist, not your enemy. We need to work together if we want her to be okay.”

“Alright, well.” Art looked Daniel up and down. “Too bad you’re such a nerdly-looking guy. You could get a great chick for yourself if you styled up a bit.”

Daniel coughed and cover his mouth, holding down the corners to prevent laughing.

“Yeah, Art? You could be right.” He said

Over the loudspeakers, Lavonne’s disembodied voice interrupted. “Smoke break, South Unit residents.”

In the three weeks that Art lived at Bridges, Daniel and Debbie worked intensely on the voices. He got her to say “F-You.” Not the whole word, just the F, but it helped. Buoyed by her progress, he managed to squeeze in an almost impossible to get appointment for her with Dr. Slymer, the visiting psychiatrist who came once monthly.

He accompanied Debbie through the heavy locked double doors that led to the administrative offices where Dr. Slymer preferred to stay, and entered the small room with the brass nameplate that read “Visitor.” Dr. Slymer leaned back in the faux leather chair and offered Debbie and Daniel the plastic folding chairs.

“What can I do you for?” He smiled, revealing symmetrical, gleaming dental work.

“I want to change my medication please,” Debbie whispered.

“And why is that, my dear?”

“My meds don’t stop the voices, you know, in the mind? And I’ve heard there’s some better ones out now.”

“Well,” Dr. Slymer answered, facing Daniel, “as you know, those new name-brand meds aren’t covered by her insurance and they’re very expensive. Management’s not going to buy it—their formulary is very limited. Unfortunately, my hands are tied.”

Debbie sat up straighter. “Doctor, my parents are well-off. I’m sure they would pay if you’d approve the prescription.”

“Well, there’s also a matter of fairness, Debbie. If I do that for you, I’d have to do it for everyone else here.” Dr. Slymer said, “And wouldn’t that open a whole can of worms?”

Debbie slumped in her chair.

Dr. Slymer continued to address Daniel. “These chronic schizophrenics have been through the revolving doors of care for years. We’re talking maintenance here, not cure.”

“I understand, doctor,” Daniel answered, “but with all due respect, I don’t think there’s going to be a stampede of residents demanding new drugs. I’m advocating for

Debbie because she really has a lot of strengths. She's one of the most high-functioning residents here, despite the frequency of her auditory hallucinations."

Daniel smiled at Debbie and kept his eyes focused on her as he continued. "I had to bust my butt to get her this appointment with you and we're not leaving here unless you can give me a real reason why you can't write her a new script."

Dr. Slymer sucked on the end of his pen and pulled out a pad from his white smock. "And who are you again in relation to this young woman?"

"Her therapist. I'm one of the Master's counseling interns. My supervising professor is very interested in following my work on this case."

"You're really not going to let up on this are you? You interns are a real pain in the posterior, you know?" Dr. Slymer scribbled something on the pad and tore the top sheet off. "A one-month trial and I need to see her on my next round."

Despite Daniel's victory, Debbie's voices did not diminish on the new meds, and worse yet, they caused her agitation and suicidal ideation. After a few weeks, she couldn't even get a walk pass to see Art, which spiraled her down further.

Dr. Slymer had to be called to change back her prescription, and ended up putting her on an even higher dose than her original, insisting it wasn't meant to be punitive. Meanwhile, Daniel kept researching Debbie's list of questions, desperately hoping the answers might soothe her. But his professors brushed him off with vague answers about interactions between neurotransmitters, synaptic highways, and involuntary vasovagal responses dating back to Neanderthal days. The less Daniel was able to find answers to

Debbie's questions, the more he was answering his own—about his career path, his stomach problems, and what he'd been avoiding.

After weeks of ineffective research, Daniel approached Debbie in her room, where she lay zoned-out on the bed, against daytime rules. He brought her outside to talk privately with the promise of an extra cigarette, also against the rules.

"I'm sorry, Debbie. I wasn't really able to get solid answers." He pulled her list from his pocket and held it out to her. "It seems those feelings are basically caused by some leftover reflexes from the caveman days. I could try to make you a diagram, but I'm not too good with drawing saber-tooth tigers.

Debbie gave him a wan half-smile. Her falcon brows barely lifted, subdued by the meds. "That's okay, Daniel. I guess some things just can't be explained." She pulled herself to sitting. "Anyways, I did get some kind of good news. Art got fired from Westy's. I guess he went off... yelling at the customers to pick up their trash, and throwing it back at them. He's coming back. It's not good news for him, but I'm sure gonna be glad to see him."

"I'm glad for you, too," Daniel said, and strangely, he meant it.

The day Art came back from Bridges, everyone cheered, except the staff. They mostly shook their heads and muttered. But the residents, polarized by Art's heroic, magnetic return to love, swarmed Debbie from behind. Milton, still wearing his cat ears, along with the King Tut man tried to raise her onto their shoulders, but since she towered over them, they created a raft of their arms and hoisted her aboard, with several others trailing close behind with arms outstretched to catch her just in case. The teetering

calamity moved forward along the hall as Debbie kept partial weight on her feet, half sitting/half walking, to where Art stood by the nurse's station waiting for the charge nurse to finish writing his re-entry plan and assign him a room.

Hearing the growing commotion, Daniel looked up from his pile of charting and saw Debbie perched like a maharaja's princess, with a veil of lacy bras someone had draped over her head like a bride-to-be. Lavonne reached for the microphone inside the nursing station and called "Code 9" for the charge nurse to return from her lunch.

"Art!" Debbie shouted. She scrambled out of the arm-chair, and rushed toward him. The rest of the residents quickly fell away, leaving Debbie and Art in a mind/body melt, flinging tears and saliva on the floor. Dripping, tripping, bumping against the walls, they traveled the hall to the laundry room door, which Art opened with one hand, knocking stacks of folded sheets and towels to the ground, as he pulled Debbie in.

Lavonne and the charge nurse got busy filling meds in the back room. King Tut and Eleanor sat in the TV room and listened openly, while the Joe and the others pretended to watch the screen, but turned red. The rest went to their rooms and shut the doors—against daytime rules—to hump their hands and cry into pillows, in a collective beat and moan.

Daniel rolled his chair up to the counter of the nursing station to finish his charting. Setting last file folder on top of a carefully balanced stack, he stared for a moment through the plexiglass with its half-moon opening for passing meds. It reminded him of an upside-down Cheshire Cat grin, floating in the transparency, and he mirrored it

with a right-side up smile as he pulled out a sheet of blank paper, and composed a notice to his graduate advisor. He pulled out another sheet and scribbled his letter of resignation. He folded both drafts and put them in his pocket, along with Debbie's list. He would type them up at home. He had no idea what he would do next, but at least he knew what he was feeling. He reached for the microphone.

“Smoke break, South Unit residents,” he announced, then headed out toward the courtyard, cigarette in hand.

Daniel blew smoke rings into the air, pretending they were frosty breaths. He would move to the mountains, he thought, get in touch with his true nature, and figure out the rest there. He tipped his ash into the battered turquoise coffee can, looked at the burning end of his cigarette, and blew another ring into the sky, his mouth forming a circle of oh, oh, oh's.