

Acting Out

As soon as I hit the buzzer I could feel the lump in my throat again. I'm still not sure what it was about the place. I mean, I knew about disease, but I guess madness is hard to think about the same way you think about stomach ulcers. I don't know, maybe other third-years got spooked that way too. So the double doors opened, and I told myself this Cuckoo's Nest was really nothing like the one in movie. I looked at the wall clock that said 7:55, and then the whiteboard hand-printed with fresh magic marker: "Today is Monday, September 19, 1977". Whoever changed the date beat me in here every morning. You can imagine someone on the night shift uncapping that magic marker at exactly 12:01 AM.

I went on ahead, stepped over Mr. Murphy like it was no big deal, and looked for Gerri. I found her sitting in the break room poring over some notes. She had her customary styrofoam cup in one hand, Bic pen in the other. She also had on her customary frown.

Nurse Ratched. I smiled. "Morning, Gerri."

Kind of a half-sigh: "Oh, good morning, uh--"

"Jane."

"Jane. Sorry. Don't know where my head is this morning. I need some stronger coffee, this stuff is like bilge water." She motioned toward the door with the styrofoam-cup hand. "By the way, is Murphy still lying out there in the hallway?"

"Yes...I just ignored him the way you said, but he's so big, it's hard to get--uh, over him. Weird, how he just doesn't move."

“I know, classic catatonic. The night shift said he’s been out there since four AM. The Thorazine hasn’t done much to keep him from acting out. Fact I’m starting to wonder if the Parkinsonian side-effects could be making him worse.”

“So...”

“So for now we stay with the behavioral approach too.” Another sigh. “*So-o...yep*, while it’s hard to ignore a 300-pound lump of dead weight blocking the hallway, we don’t want to reinforce *undesired* behavior by acknowledging it, right?”

“Right,” I answered. Not that I really believed it. You have to be a little skeptical about reward and punishment really getting to a guy like that. But Gerri was the boss. She called the shots on her patients. Or I should say “clients”, as she and the other psychiatric social workers called them. The clients were housed on 3C-North, City Center VA hospital. All the daily grunt work here was done by the mid- and lower level staff, although the psychiatrists took the credit. The prevailing shrink was Dr. Stanley Roth, whom I would find to be a less sanguine mentor even than Gerri. You may have heard that Roth was a closet homosexual. Whatever, he didn’t like women and was fond of saying they had no business in the practice of Medicine.

“Okay,” said Gerri, “No admits from last night; time for morning Group. Let’s see if we can coax Murphy into a chair.”

Group therapy took place five mornings a week in the day room. It’s this big, airy space stocked with games, a TV, books, and an old upright piano. My role so far in Group was to sit silently through each session watching Gerri call on patients to “share”. Most of them didn’t do much sharing, but just slouched like dolls with glass eyes. I speculated that it was the Thorazine, or maybe it was just the “flat affect” that schizophrenics are supposed to have.

My mind wandered a lot during Group. I was *not* crazy about it, no pun intended; in fact I didn't seem to be bonding much with psychiatry in general. The readings I loved, but the reality is seriously depressing. Funny. I used to think *my* family was dysfunctional, but once Dad finally quit his weekend binges, which cured Mom's sick headaches, which let my baby sister have a life, they all but turned into the Cleavers. Dad and I had bonded early, both of us having this dreamer gene that my mother and sister didn't get. A mixed blessing in a way.

Somebody in Group was sharing. It was one of the WW II vets touting his new privilege of going to the Canteen. A few of the others muttered or nodded some kind of accolades. Only five minutes more. My eyes happened to fall on a young guy about my age. He was tall, and had mastered the seated slouch to the degree that you'd swear he was made of straw. His face was beautiful, in a kind of translucent way. His deep gray eyes were his best feature. There was a kind of backlit darkness to them that reminded me of a storm cloud--you know, the kind that blows in to threaten summer afternoons.

After Group was over, I asked Gerri his name.

"Oh, Tim Hardwick? Roth's personal client, acute schizophrenic break. He's about 22 or 23. Seems to be responding to Haldol, but I don't really have a good feel for the case right now. Father's some big-wig at the university, and demanded that his little boy be treated only by the *psychiatrist*." Gerri rolled her eyes. She's good at that. "Ask Roth when he comes in. Or maybe draw Tim out a little yourself--we have permission to *talk* to him. Go on, I saw him in the day room."

"I've never interviewed a psych patient myself," I said, clearly defining myself as a lame third-year with no self-confidence.

“You’re not expected to cure him, for god’s sake. Do you plan to learn any psychiatry while you’re here?”

Taking this in the spirit it was meant, I headed for the day room and approached Tim Hardwick. He was sitting on the piano bench, hunched over the keyboard, picking out a few notes with one finger.

“Tim?” I startled him.

“Hm??”

“Um...hi, I’m Jane. The med student on this ward? What are you playing?”

“Oh--nothing. Do you play the piano?”

“Actually I do. I took lessons as a kid.”

“Do you think you could you teach me a little?”

This did not sound like a great idea.

Seriously, did I just nod?

“That’d be cool...” his voice trailed off. He was staring into space, but I was staring at his irises. The dark gray parts were rimmed with a brighter ring, almost like a corona.

He blinked. “Here, show me something?”

So I spent the next fifteen minutes teaching Tim Hardwick about Middle C, the five-finger position, and how to play a scale.

This I repeated every other day for the next two weeks, until he had a pretty good idea of the basics. He was better overall, too. He still didn’t make much eye contact, but you could tell. He was walking a little taller, speaking with a little more assurance. I meanwhile started to feel little pangs of disappointment if I didn’t see him. I made a point of staying awake in Group.

On the fifth lesson, over the G Major scale, I finally got the courage to delve into the disease.

“So Tim, how did you...wind up in here?”

“I went crazy. Three-C-N, Cuckoo’s Nest, right?”

I smiled. “Unfortunate coincidence. But really, what happened?”

“Okay...well...back in high school I was starting to have some problems.”

“Like what?”

“Like, I got into smoking weed, and was stupid enough to get caught selling--just a lid of marijuana, but it caused this minor legal hassle--then I sorta copped out on the whole scene. My grades dropped, but I graduated. Then my parents took up getting me into some elitist private college where they knew the dean. They wanted to control, like my every move.”

“Wow--”

“So I signed up for the Marines, basically to piss off my old man. By then I figured they weren’t gonna send me to Vietnam, so what the hell. Of course I didn’t fit in *there*, so I ended up leaving and going to school here. Sophomore year, the voices started.”

“That must have been scary.”

“It was in a way...but then again it wasn’t.”

“What do you mean?”

“The voices were actually *nice* at first...sometimes I was nobody, and they’d make me feel like *somebody*. Lots of times I felt so alone, they even seemed to be, like company. But man, later they started to bring up some *bad* shit.”

“Do you want to talk about that?” Proud of my interviewing skills.

“They called me a little girl, a fucking fag....and then a lot pretty nasty things--you don’t even wanna hear those. And they kept saying that I should...*do* something to myself..”

“Oh my god. Did they ever tell you to really hurt yourself?”

“Yeah...it got worse as time went on. If I walked around campus, everybody would look at me, point at my crotch, and laugh. I bought a Swiss army knife, and I was gonna--get rid of--you know...but I was too big a coward.”

He stopped talking and stared downward.

I thought I should back off. “Hey, you don’t have to talk about it.” I touched his hand. “Let’s just do a little more music.”

Looking for Tim for his ninth lesson, I ran into Dr. Stanley Roth at the nurses’ station. Both his salt-and-pepper hair and white lab coat looked like they were ordered up with heavy starch.

“Dr. Roth, have you seen Tim Hardwick? I’m giving him piano lessons,” I added a tiny after-giggle--one of those noises you regret the second it slips out.

“I’m sorry...” He looked me up and down. “You are--?”

“Jane Mandesi, the student on this ward.”

“Oh. He’s down in his room. His father’s there for a visit.”

Could I go say hello?” By now I was convinced Roth thought me a complete moron.

“I doubt Professor Hardwick would mind if you said hello. His son’s doing better. We’re thinking of discharging him to outpatient care next week.”

“Great,” I came back a little too quickly. I was pleased, honestly, but there was that twinge--nothing much, just the slightest catch in my throat. “I’m glad he’s doing so well. He told me about some of his symptoms.”

“Yes--he was paranoid, hallucinating and delusional when he came in.” Roth checked his watch theatrically. “I have a meeting with Gerri Kanos now, do you need anything else?”

I wanted to say yes, but you can see where that conversation was headed. After showering Roth with inappropriate gratitude, I decided to go see Tim. His room was at the far end of the hallway. Through the door I saw him talking to a wiry bald man carrying an oddly-shaped black case. I couldn’t place his face, but knew I’d seen it somewhere.

“Hel-” I got that much out before Tim shut the door on me. So I was left standing in the hallway overhearing a few unintelligible lines of conversation. The door opened again, and zip--the older guy was on his way out, back up the hall toward the exit. A man with a purpose.

Tim was flushed. “I...that was my dad. He stopped in on his way to work. Walks three miles. He’s kind of a fitness nut. Anyway, sorry. Come on in.”

“No problem.” I was slightly miffed as I walked in, but then I saw he was a little stressed. Beads of sweat were pearly up on his face. And his speech seemed a little pressured, too--not the usual slackness. Some disagreement with his dad?

I decided to move forward. “Okay, let’s go, are you ready for your lesson today? And hey, what was that case your dad was carrying? Some kind of musical instrument?”

“French horn. Okay, let’s move, groove--”

“Wait...I remember him now! I’ve seen him play in the orchestra. Yeah, *Martin* Hardwick...the principal horn player, and...isn’t he head of the University Music Department?

“Um, yeah--”

“And...you never had any music lessons?” I had yet to put this together.

“No!” Big pause. “Okay, some.”

“Some.”

“Okay...a lot. I played French horn. I was majoring in it when I got sick.”

“*Majoring* in it?” What? “So you were letting me teach you these Mickey Mouse music skills--”

“Hey Jane, I wasn’t sure what to do, so I kind of played along. I liked the piano lessons, and I hadn’t played my horn since I quit classes, and the Marine Band--”

“--and the whole time you knew I was making an idiot of myself, showing you crap like ‘how to play a scale’. Guess you really knew how to play *me*, didn’t you? The *Marine* Band? Jesus.”

“Jane...I’m sorry, I really am. Don’t be mad. I should have said something, but that day you came up to me at the piano...I--” His stormy eyes were about to rain.

“It’s okay--” The eyes were getting to me.

“I mean, I thought you were the most beautiful girl I’d ever seen, and I kept up the music thing because, well, I must’ve thought it was the only way to get someone like you to hang around with a loser like me.”

“Tim...” I was now a total pushover. “Please, you are *not* a loser. Hey, you got an illness, but you’re dealing with it now. I was just...feeling like a dork, I guess. It’s like you were having this little joke at my expense.”

“No, I’m the dork here. Not one thought about how you’d feel.”

“No, sorry. *I’m* the dork,” I flashed a smile.

“No, no, me, me, *me* the dork.”

I knew not to look straight into his eyes, the way you don’t look at a solar eclipse, but I did. Sprites were flickering behind the storm clouds. A charge of electricity shimmered through me.

He closed the door behind him and gathered me in his arms. The kiss was too sweet.

“Tim, no, we can’t do this...”

“No one will hear, they’re all down at art therapy. Please, Jane...god, you’re so beautiful.”

Maybe this is what I wanted all along.

When it was over, I couldn’t tell whether the slight flutter in my chest was just from nerves mixed with pleasure, or something deeper. Something--

Tim watched me get my scrubs back on. “I know you have to get back on the floor, Janie. You know, you’re the reason I’m doing so much better. I even quit the Haldol last week, did I tell you that?” He laughed. “I just pretended to take it--the nurses here are so trusting.”

“What--?”

“I knew I didn’t need it anymore, and it made me feel like an effin’ zombie anyway.”

“But I thought you said it was helping?”

“Well, it did stop the voices...which came back this week, but they haven’t been a problem. In fact they’ve been good! They think we should be together.”

I know what you're going to say.

I measured my words. "Tim...maybe you should reconsider. You need the Haldol."

"Hey, listen to the budding shrink. 'Need the Haldol', my ass. For a minute I actually thought you felt what *I* felt."

"I did...but I don't think this should happen again." The fluttering was getting a lot worse.

"Goddammit, Jane. You're no better than the others, they think I'm a fuck-cluck-sucking loser, and so do you."

"No, no, that's not true. It's just--"

"It's just that you're this princess-doctor-queen of everything, and I'm a nut case in a psycho ward. Should'a known, should'a blown, should'a flown..."

"Tim...I have to go. Someone will wonder where we are."

"Fine, go tell 'em I attacked you, or something. That'll work, they'll go for that big time. 'Psycho rapes promising med student'."

"Tim...I'll see you tomorrow--I promise." I was starting to feel sick.

From the hallway I heard him say something about not being a coward anymore.

I had to get to a restroom. I ran into a stall and threw up.

Tomorrow would be okay. It was just once--just a mistake. I lay awake most of the night thinking about how I'd make it up to Tim. You know, convincing myself everything would be fine, because it had to be.

The next morning just as I got to 3-C North, I was hearing the ward clerk calling my name on the paging system.

“Oh good, here you are, Dr. Mandesi,” Cheryl was instructed to call us all Doctor. “Dr. Roth and Gerri are in the break room. They want you to come in.”

“Okay, Cheryl.” My stomach was churning. “Do you know why Roth’s here this early?”

“I s’pose it’s about the incident last night.”

“What--? What kind of incident?”

“I was told not to discuss it, Doc. You better ask them.”

“All right, thanks.” It’s hard to sound nonchalant while your teeth are chattering.

In the break room Roth and Gerri were deep in a discussion they cut off the second they saw me.

“Jane,” said Gerri, “Come on in, sit down.”

I obliged. “Um, good morning. What--”

“Ms. Mandesi,” said Roth, “We’ve had a serious setback involving Tim Hardwick.”

I thought my throat was swelling. “What happened?”

Gerri looked at me. “Well, you know he had Canteen privileges. He went down there and somehow smuggled out a kitchen knife. Last night around midnight he--”

“Oh no--”

“--Tried to amputate his penis. An aide heard him scream. Said there was blood everywhere, but--I guess it was lucky the knife wasn’t very sharp. Anyway, they rushed him to Urology, where they got the wound repaired. Luckily it turned out to be just a nasty laceration.”

I sat paralyzed to the chair.

Roth's turn. "Ms. Mandesi...you'd gone in to see him yesterday afternoon. Apparently at the time of this--incident last night, he was fully paranoid, hallucinating, and repeatedly 'confessing' to rape."

Oh my god.

"Jane," said Gerri, "You were the one whose name he kept repeating. We just need to know. Did something happen?"

Oh my god.

"Jane?"

"No. We just--talked for awhile."

Roth gave me an unreadable look. "Was his affect at all unusual? I mean, he'd been doing well, and then suddenly he acts out like this. If you know anything, you need to tell us, now."

"No, nothing. Well...he seemed nervous. He said something about Haldol. I can't remember exactly what."

"We know he wasn't swallowing it. His blood levels came back close to zero," said Gerri. "Jane, I know you like Tim. You aren't protecting him, are you? Did he get...aggressive with you? This rape thing, out of the blue--"

"No, no! Of course not, you'd have heard me scream, or something. He didn't do anything like that. Maybe...maybe he *thought* he did...the delusions--"

"I'm gathering your attentions meant more, at least to him, than music lessons, Ms. Mandesi." Roth was leaning back in his chair, swiveling left and right.

"I was trying to help--I guess I didn't think he--"

“You didn’t *think*, period, Ms. Mandesi.” Roth glared at me. “Tell me, are you familiar with the phenomenon of *transference*?”

I nodded, swallowing back the nausea.

“Good. I suggest you do more reading on it. And report on it to Dr. Cruz on 2C-West, where you’ll finish your psychiatry rotation.”

“You’re transferring me?” Bad question.

“Ms. Mandesi, I only know that since you’ve been teaching Mr. Hardwick to play the piano, he has stopped his medication, totally decompensated, and acted out in a way that could’ve ended up fatally. He’ll be back on this floor in a few days. Perhaps you have a better suggestion?”

I was in freefall.

Next stop, the Cuckoo’s Nest.

Roth got up to leave for rounds and smoothed an imaginary crease out of his white jacket.

“Gerri, please check on Hardwick on Urology, and make sure they’re keeping him calm. I switched him to the Haldol injectable. Oh, and call me immediately when the parents come back.”

“Okay, no problem.”

After Roth was gone Gerri turned to me. She had a look you might have even called sympathy. “Sorry, this was quite a shock to have to come into this morning. Just be glad I was here early. Roth was absolutely livid.”

“Jesus...”

“He’s being more of an asshole than necessary, though. It’s not like it’s your fault that Tim decompensated. In fact, and this does not leave this room, if Roth had been doing a better job, he would’ve picked up on the behavioral changes.”

“Gerri, I...”

“What?”

“Nothing. So, do I go down to 2C-West today?”

“That’s fine--today or tomorrow. No big deal. You only have, what--another week or two? You may not get a whole lot out of it, but you’ll get to experience the drug and alcohol rehab unit.”

I took the stairs down to the second floor. In the stairwell landing, someone had written “Help” on the wall. I wondered if they meant it as a question or an answer. My legs felt weak, so I sat down on the steps.

I close my eyes and see storm clouds, but no sprites.

Don’t worry. I’ll feel better in two weeks when my Surgery rotation starts. Surgery is where excising an offending organ makes sense. And there won’t be any acting out there--maybe some anesthetized disembowelment. No big deal.