

Psychotropic Ultimatums and John the Baptist

It was the winter of 2011 and '12, my first Code Blue, and the shelter was standing-room only. The beds filled up and the men kept coming, and by midnight the linoleum floor of the dayroom was covered with them, their coats rolled up under their heads. Normally the shelter would close its doors once it hit capacity. Normally if someone who came for a bed was clearly intoxicated or aggressive or problematic they'd be turned away, for the benefit of the rest of the men. Not so during a Code Blue.

"Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in," I joked once with a guy in the dayroom. "Robert Frost said that."

"Whoever said it never spent a night on that floor."

What first drew our attention to John, then, was this: about a week into the Code Blue his number was called, meaning a bed had opened up with his name on it, and he passed.

"But don't you want to get up off that *linoleum*?" Miss Bet, the shelter manager, asked. Besides being harder than any sidewalk in the city, the dayroom floor was scrubbed with pine oil every day.

"I would rather the bed," said John, "go to someone who needs it." That same hour he was referred to me, the shelter's mental health case manager, for immediate assessment. John sat in my office, Bible in lap, and answered my questions politely and without elaboration.

"Hey. How you doing?"

"Fine, thank you."

"King James?"

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“Yes, sir.”

“So what brings you in? All that snow?”

“The police.”

This was the other side of the coin of the Code Blue: not only was the city required to make room for everyone who wanted to come inside, they weren't allowed to leave them a choice. Outreach went around in vans through the snow, giving out the Code Blue Ultimatum:

“Ladies and gentlemen, you know the drill. City called a Code Blue--time to come inside. To shelter. Because of the weather. Because it's not safe out here. No, Miss Shelly, that abandominium on forty-eighth don't count as coming inside. Because is there heat and water? Is there windows? If the answer is no, no, and no, then all that's why it don't count. So pile in now, plenty room in the van. Anyone want to stick around, police are right behind me with a whole stack of 302s ready to sign your life away.”

302 being a petition for involuntary psychiatric inpatient treatment.

Line of reason being: you'd have to be nuts to stay out here in this. *A clear and present danger to yourself.*

To hear him tell it that afternoon in my closet of an office, John was not nuts: he turned down the bed because he wasn't planning on staying long anyway. As soon as the weather let up he'd be back out there, and he didn't want to take up the bed when it might make a difference in the life of the person behind him.

“Even the simple act of me laying in that bed,” John finished, “is selfish. I'd be taking it away from someone who needs it. Possession is theft.”

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I wrote that down, tickled, and thanked him for his time. He was in bad need of a shave and the smell of him stuck around after he'd left, and of course there were the clothes--he refused the fresh change I'd offered. But part of the reason I took the job in the first place was to extend the benefit of the doubt to the somewhat doubtful. And anyway it wasn't *all* doubt with John. He was well-spoken. He was *soft*-spoken. He made perfect sense once you actually sat him down.

"Well it doesn't make sense to *me*," said Miss Bet that next day. She waved the list of referrals in my face, which I'd left John off of. "You're supposed to be here to *help* us handle the ones with the mental health, and here this man comes in crazy as a bedbug and you're the one *keeping* him from help."

(On my role, briefly: I acted as go-between for the shelter and the psychiatrist. Before my time, Miss Bet would make referrals directly to Dr. Van Zijl--they created my position in part to weed out the ones who were simply strange or sad from making it to the psych, saving the psych time and thus the shelter money.

To quote Dr. Van Zijl from the first referral I ever made to him, on what constitutes an appropriate referral: "Of course he's depressed, he's homeless. It's the ones whistling dixie that ought to ring bells for you. Write that down."

And then, briefly, on me: this was my first real job. I had been an English Major and always figured I'd teach or something. I was twenty-five. I wrote a lot of things down that first year.)

A few days after I left him off that referral list, then, John was found in a bathroom stall arguing with what seemed like nobody at all.

"Arguing, shoot. That man was engaged in a one-sided screaming match with

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his own damn echoes, excuse my language.”

I went ahead and made the psych referral. As I filled it out Miss Bet leaned over my shoulder told-you-so. She always smelled like butterscotch but not in a good way.

I sat in on all the psych evals, and by this point was used to Dr. Van Zijl’s style of approach--it reminded me of that Jackie Chan movie--the drunken master, the way it lulled and disarmed, and how you could never be sure which of the movements he made were intentional. He offered some choice parables from the Bible with John, and then moved on to swap camping stories--John was only passing through Philadelphia, it turned out. He lived on the road, and kept mostly to wooded areas. Van Zijl, in turn, considered himself a pilgrim of the Appalachian Trail. Just as I went to check my phone the doctor made a sharp left turn into the consequential:

“So why not tell me about these voices?”

“Not voices,” John said, calm and practiced. It was a conversation he’d had before. “Voice.”

“So,” I said, “there’s only one of them?” Van Zijl shot me a look.

“There is,” said John, looking me dead in the chest, “only one God.” I wrote that down. This would become central to the way in which I understood John, and distinct from the rest of my clients with schizophrenia: whereas for most the voices were a burden, a curse, source of anxiety, confusion, terror--in John’s case the hallucinations were something to hold on to, an ongoing conversation with God.

We talked a little about hospitalizations and Van Zijl couldn’t believe John was old enough to have been at Byberry. This was another thing about John--he

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looked like he was in his later thirties--full head of hair, no lines to his face--but the man was fifty-two. Already two years past the average life expectancy for somebody so homeless for so long.

When the conversation turned to meds, John's face clouded over. It struck me then what a forehead he had, broad and high and darkening now, and somehow deepening. John said that if that was the way things were going to go, he would leave out this afternoon, Code Blue or not.

"I appreciate what you're trying to do," John said, calmly and practiced, "but I'd rather take my chances out there."

"What do you think?" VZ asked me afterward, and straightaway told me *his* thoughts: that we could go either way--on the one hand, John was fairly symptomatic, but then on the other he seemed somewhat in possession of himself, and this very well might be his baseline, and we might be doing more harm than good, scaring him off into the woods, in winter.

"Cutting him off from God, right?" I was captivated by it all.

"Sure. But isn't there just something about him that just gives you the creeps?" said VZ. "Maybe it's the hair. It's like a bunch of spiders up there, having a meeting."

I gave him shit for that, pointing out that a psychiatrist who wears as much denim as he did might give someone the creeps too, especially when they call themselves a *pilgrim* in a psych eval and tell unsolicited story after unsolicited story of their Catholic school days--

"You like this guy, huh?"

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It was the first decision he ever deferred to me, not to medicate John, and I handed it down to Miss Bet without a trace of who-told-who. I wasn't here for told-you-so's, and afterward, walking through the day room John gave me a nod and I gave one back. This was what I was here for. I coasted home on my bicycle that night and while everyone else was asleep John rose from his place on the linoleum floor. He went without a word or sound to the dayroom window, put his head against it several, several times, collapsed in a pool of blood and shatter-proof glass, and woke sixteen hours later, in a place he wouldn't make sense of until another two months had passed, to the sight of a young woman with green eyes plugging a tube into his arm.

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"Thorazine was the real game-changer, just in terms of what we could *do* with them," VZ told me during one of those talks I would have with him, back when I first started. They were meant to provide context on some of the guys I was working with, their illnesses and treatments, and took place after hours, at the same dive bar I used to go to in college because they never ID'ed:

"People have these very strong thoughts and opinions about some of the heavier hitting antipsychotics, and that's fine, and a lot of it's valid--I mean, we're still not exactly sure how it all *works*. But without *Thorazine*, and here's the point, we could have never, say, closed Byberry. You don't know what *Byberry* is? Oh, you young buck--okay, history lesson, where's your pencil and paper? Back before Kennedy signed his big Community Mental Health act in the sixties, we didn't really know what to do with these people with these, what, these *brain diseases*. We'd

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throw them all into one of the big state hospitals, strap them down, contain them. Jail them, sure. Best we could do, without even touching on lobotomies or EST-- lesson for another day. But so then Kennedy came on TV and signed the bill that started the whole Community Mental Health Movement--the treatment of people in the *community* as opposed to the big state hospitals. And, yeah, so Byberry was our biggie. And people like to hold that up as this great humanitarian victory, by the way--and sure, that's fine, in lots of ways it was. I mean there are some *ghost* stories about Byberry, you should Google it sometime. But what I'm telling you is without Thorazine it never would have happened. Don't celebrate John Kennedy. Celebrate the advent of the antipsychotic. Another?"

The bartender had already brought us another.

"And so they shut down Byberry and all those people are finally free to go, where, *home*? What home, right? I mean these are folks whose families shipped them off thirty, forty years ago. Long story short, they became the problem of the shelters, and the shelters learned to lean on the miracle of modern medication. Fast forward and here we are, you and me, gainfully employed." We touched glasses, I think in thanks. VZ had been doing it for thirty years or something.

In a nutshell, and at least as I understand it from those talks with Van Zijl, it works like this: schizophrenia is linked to some overactive synapses firing off in your brain, and your classic antipsychotic--Thorazine grandfather to them all--quiets down that firing. Shuts it off. Spend ten minutes in the dayroom if you want to see what that looks like in a person who's been on the stuff for long enough, but you probably have the idea from the movies--the shuffle of the feet, the involuntary

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pawing of the mouth, the clouding of the brain so that it becomes impossible to piece thoughts together if, say, reading was something you used to like to do, or simple math.

The accepted wisdom being that a zero of a person is preferable to a negative.

“I heard it all the way the hell from down the hallway. Just a WAP, WAP. When I ran down and saw it was bol’s *head* making that sound. And that window, Mr. Patrick, that glass ain’t just glass, it’s run with them wires, you know? So with every WAP, WAP a few more squares fell out from their wire diamonds or whatever. Bryce and them tried to pull him down but bol shook them off like they was nothing at all. That little white bol, couldn’t weigh more than a buck-fifty, I don’t know where it came from. WAP, WAP, like a hammer. Truly, I never seen some shit like that before. I didn’t think a person’s head could make that sound, Mr. Patrick. WAP WAP WAP WAP WAP WAP WAP. I think I caught some, what do you call it, vicarious trauma. Set me up with VZ?”

I got a half-dozen such accounts from my guys in there that next morning. From Miss Bet I got a copy of the police report, John’s room number in the hospital, and a pat on the shoulder. She wasn’t any type of way about it. She seemed more just tired than anything.

It would be another two months before I’d get John’s story, but the head nurse’s was this:

“Your friend in there’s an animal. Sent one of my girls to the ER. Yeah, well, believe it, hon. Brought him in late last night, stitched up that giant head of his--

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sixty-four stitches, think it was? And then just as she was bringing him back up--real sweetheart, Ashley is, by the way--what's he do but jump—*jump*. Jump off the bed and get his *hands around her neck*. *Oh no* ain't the half of it. Threw her like a doll across the room, started bashing his own head against the floor. Split the thing right back open. She's going to be fine, thank god. What a mess, though. On the floor, the walls--here, look, Joan, do we have a copy of the police report? Got his friend or something here. I want him off my floor, Joan. I don't care anymore. Off my floor. Who are you to him again?"

The room in the ICU was dimly lit and crossed with shadows. Tubes poking out from his arms, from between his legs, mask hooked onto his mouth, pumping his chest up and down and making all the Darth Vader sounds, the steady beep. Head wrapped in white so I couldn't see anything except for just how big it was. I couldn't tell if that was the swelling or the gauze or just his forehead looming even larger. I never thought of a coma being something you could *do* to someone, and sustain, but they kept him under for two full months--the time it took the courts to sort out what to do with him.

John's sentence was settled while he was still under. The judge kept him out of jail but mandated outpatient treatment--medication nonnegotiable. He was assigned a PO to check in with monthly--Frank Dragon. You can't make a name like that up. Or you could, but unless it was real a name like that would fall flat. Details take on a different kind of weight when they're real. Things that otherwise feel hokey. The scar ran right down the middle of John's forehead. It was painful to look at and know that it wasn't the product of some success of a brain surgery, the way

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passers-by might assume, but that what had been the matter with John's head was only the hospital floor, the day-room window several, several times. A voice he decided was God, if decided is the word for it. Before they brought him out of that coma they gave him three weeks' worth of antipsychotics and mood stabilizers in the drip that hung to his side. He was groggy when I came to see him, but he remembered everything and was wide open with me.

"So, then," I summarized, after he'd explained that night in the dayroom, "it was a kind of punishment."

"Yes."

"For what?"

Pause. "I won't say."

"Sins, though?"

"We all sin."

"Okay. But then, so as punishment, God told you to put your head through that window?" I wanted to understand him.

"You don't understand. God didn't tell me to do anything. I know what you're going to write down in that book--*command hallucinations*--but he didn't *command* anything. He *did*. It was Him all along."

Another pause, mine. "And what about the nurse?"

"The woman. She was my captor." Then he paused again, this time for a long time. "Her eyes were very green. I'm sorry that I did that to her, but, Patrick— Patrick. Please. You have to tell me, what did they put in me?"

It was the only time he ever said my name. "There are a few things in there

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but mostly it's Seraquel. I can show you if you want. So you don't hear Him anymore?"

All he did was close his eyes.

"It's not jail," I offered. This then would be the demon John wrestled those last lonely months. The court-mandated medicated state and the question of which prison was worse.

(Did I wrestle, too? I did not. There was no choice left for me to wrestle with—I would keep Van Zijl in the loop, he would keep the supply of meds coming, Miss Bet would make sure they were administered. Nonnegotiable, judge's ruling. I would never have to decide another thing about John, and I would avoid the topic of God altogether.)

In the end it was John's faith that delivered him from this place.

"Which John are you?" I asked him that last day. Three or so months had passed since they let him go from the hospital, and he wasn't able to read the Bible anymore. Not like he used to--he couldn't hold more than a sentence or two in his head at a time, and most of that time he spent in bed, a courtesy extended to only a handful. I guess I'll add that Miss Bet took him back without a quip, and was especially considerate toward him. She made sure the staff sought him out every morning and nighttime and administered his medications exactly. "I just pray for that man," she told me once, during that time. The spiderweb he'd put in the dayroom window was still there.

"Which John am I?"

We were out in the lot behind the shelter. The line of the scar was prominent

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on his forehead, the pink dots on either side glistened in the sun, which was right on top of us. The dots were from the staples that held his head together, and the whole story of it there on his forehead made him look like something put together, man-made. Frankenstein. The hair and the beard that the hospital shaved had grown back in, giving him his old, wild look.

“Baptist or Evangelist? John’s my confirmation name, you know.” Who knows why I breached this conversation now. Maybe I could tell he was on his way out.

“And actually I always forget which John I chose, Baptist or Evangelist. But really--and I never told anyone this before--I chose the name because of John Diangelo. This kid in middle school I’d wanted to be in some middle-school way. It’s stupid now, the way I’d hold up every little thing about someone like that. Like it was his name, John, that people liked. I don’t know. I was only twelve I guess. I think I still do that, though—have a hard time separating the part from the whole. It’s probably why I started doing social work in the first place.”

John smiled at that, and he wiped the sweat from his eyes. It was ninety-seven outside, the city had called a Code Red, but he was going to go out there anyway. And I feel like a part of me knew he was going, even then, but maybe that’s just a trick of memory. I have a hard time separating the part from the whole. He did thank me before leaving.

“What for?”

“It was never about me, you know. All of this—it was all His, all along.”

John the Baptist, then.

Then he left and I never called his PO like I was supposed to. The warrant

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was issued a few months later when John failed to report, and I check the system now and then for a sign of him, but nothing so far. Every time I get a call from probation, I have this flash of dread that it's Dragon, confirming some new violence committed. So far it's always some other PO, some other client, some new concern.

Almost a hundred clients later and I still think about John and that faith he kept. About whether him leaving out that day was a test he passed or failed. What if the voice never came back? What if he's still out there in that wilderness waiting? Locusts and honey, I still do double-takes in the shelter.

And what about me. Did I pass the test? Say that my memory is correct—that a part of me knew that last day that he was going to leave. Just hypothetically, say that I had some choice in him leaving, that when he said goodbye to me that last day, when he walked his crazy head of hair off up the street, that I knew he meant it for good. That when he said goodbye he said my name again—*Goodbye, Patrick*. And if I caught the finality in that, and let it go? Didn't I want a way out for John, a kind of win? Or was it a win for me. Out of sight, out of mind—the same bargain everyone else in the world in world is able to strike every time they look right past him on the street, filthy and raving, insane, alone in a city of millions, the part from the whole at last.