

Excerpt from “Hanna Pavilion, Cleveland, Autumn 1983”

Suicide ward's a strange place to make friends; never know how long they'll last. Past the bend in the narrow hallway, an institutional sage-green elbow fixed at a right angle, past the plexiglassed glaze of the nurses' station, we took turns lighting our cigarettes, our one means left: no butter knives, no nail files, no pens, no pencils in our rooms alone. One hermit who never left his room had his underwear taken, after staff discovered a hospital robe's belt strung around his neck. Strip-search, the required rite of entry for the many forced to come here or the few who chose.

I had chosen this place, my Resident Advisor during my first college semester spotting me on my dorm room floor, nearly leaden from an overdose of sleeping pills. The university hospital seemed a safer place than my family's home, the silence scissoring me alive in a sterile back room with the door closed by family hands. I needed an end to the simmering burnt umber of old wounds seeping into November air, crisp as chromatography strips in Chem 101; each November recalled bitter, ragged ends of eras, the slow sift of childhood ashes, the barren edges of betrayal by ones who knew my name.

The hallway held a gauzy fog of cigarette smoke hovering and clinging to everything, our clothes, our hair, our skin. So intent we became on our collective escape, taking turns with the flaring crimson eye of the wall-mounted lighter blinking and glaring all hours of day and night. A gang of us chain smoking. That was the way we counted down time here, along with the 30- to 15-minute checks the nurses performed, making sure we were still there, their surveillance cameras perched in corners of single observation rooms, their audio units winking red lights in showers and stalls. (Once I hid under my bed, after pasting a crayoned picture full of tiger eyes on their 9"x11" window cut into my door. What a ruckus followed, borne of my sheer boredom).

Two African American Amazons, Shonda and Tyrese, each with a trail of tic-tac-do boards razored up forearms; a handful of teenagers: Susan, despondent with her foster home, Rick, abusing his Ritalin[®], Tony, a drug dealer who grieved the fact he sold to kids. One fireman Josh, under observation after getting caught putting out a fire he started. One crusty African

American husband Bill, who caught and shot his best friend in bed with his wife. A lumbering pale giant, Joseph, zombied on Haldol[®] for his schizophrenia, told me a poem once, "They threw a dog in the ocean. It became a dogfish. They threw a cat in the water, a catfish. A human in the water. A dolphin."

Other days, he could barely open his eyes, shuffling from his chemical shackle. Nurses feared his size, requiring 3 staff to restrain him if he decompensated and had a psychotic break.

Of the handful of seniors who could not wait for death to kindly stop for them, one of them was a newcomer, a gentleman dressed in tweeds among us, blue jeaned, t-shirted, or hospital-gowned; he sat beside me in the smoking row, though he never lit up himself.

"My name's Joe. Would you mind if I asked where you're from? Could I tell you a story?"

"Sure, we got nothing but time here until OT, you know, occupational therapy at 9. Lunch at 11:30. I'm originally from Korea, immigrated when I was 3," I answered between pulls from my cigarette.

"Thought you might be Japanese American; you remind me of a lady named Sachiko, back at camp. See, I was a guard at one of those internment camps--that's how I served my country, guarding old men, women, and kids. Families. There were some young men there, but most of them volunteered to enlist already or joined up straight out of camp. Good people they were, real good people." His voice cracked and his eyes reddened, filling with sudden tears, while mine filled with growing curiosity and shock--I looked away to give him a moment, put out my cigarette, letting a pause stretch between us.

"You were saying about Sachiko?"

"Yeah, that's right." He cleared his throat, and placed his hands on his knees. "Half of us guards were in love with her, half of the internees, too. She taught *ikebana* and *origami* to the kids, I'm sure you know, flower arranging and paper folding? The old Japanese men farmed that land, farmed that dustbowl crap land, into a garden of flowers and vegetables. They irrigated

during 90 degree weather so she could teach their kids, and they could have fresh vegetables.” He began rocking gently, back and forth in his chair, keeping time with the memory.

“After Sammy came to camp—oh, folks still don’t know about this. Bob Hope did his tour overseas, but Sammy gave us hope back home on the home front. I never was a big fan of ‘Mr. Candyman,’ that silly, sappy song, ‘til he came through and did a show for us. What a good man, a really nice man. A true human being.” Joe turned his face away, as tears began to fall.

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