

The Institutionalization

by Sara Eggleston

During the car ride to the hospital, an ever-increasing feeling of dread was building up inside me. I looked outside the car windows and was mesmerized by the bright lights as I made my way from Escanaba to Green Bay. It wasn't often I was out this late at night. It was around 10 p.m., and the car's constant humming seemed deafening in the pure silence.

I didn't want to go; my heart was racing. I was scared, knowing that it should've never gotten to this point. A few days prior, my therapist had told my guardian that she felt it was time for me to get professional help at a secluded psychiatric unit hours away from home.

I had only ever heard horror stories coming from mental hospitals. The people there don't have freedom or rights. Would there be people in lab coats with syringes, sedatives, and restraints? Would there be patients who don't even know who they are or where they were?

When I got there, I was greeted by a few workers. They had me fill out a bunch of questionnaires, which did in fact ask me if I was scared of the people in white lab coats with needles, or if I had ever been restrained. I would've laughed at the absurdity of the questions if I was not in an actual psych ward. I was terrified of the uncertainty of the situation. Reluctantly, I had marked "no" at the time.

After being screened and examined by the nurses for hours, I was brought into a psychiatric unit. The adolescent ward was full, so I spent the night in the adult one despite being only 14 years old at the time. There was one other girl there; we glanced at each other in silence, and I was quickly brought to my room. Despite the discomfort of the bed and pillows, I quickly fell asleep, exhausted from the intake experience.

I was awakened at 8 a.m. A nurse escorted me to the adolescent unit. Staff were able to find two rooms for me and the other girl. I sat in the unit's living room, quickly taking a look at the other patients who were there. One girl, with light blonde hair and fair complexion, was closely being watched by a nurse standing next to her. "Stop picking." the nurse demanded. I noticed she was picking at her own self-inflicted wounds. She paused briefly and then continued. The nurse sighed and asked her if she wanted to be put in the "quiet room" again. I noticed how dead her eyes looked. It was an uneasy feeling. I knew I did not belong there, but there was nothing I could do to get out of it.

Another girl noticed me sitting around and gestured to the coloring pages and several markers. "Try coloring, that's all you're going to be able to do here." I sat down and grabbed the folder and a journal I was given during the intake process. I had to request a pencil. It was very short and dull. I was later told by one of the patients it was like this to prevent the patients from stabbing each other.

The room I was given was terribly similar to the adult unit I had previously been in. The door could only be locked from the outside. The bed and shelf were bolted tight to the ground. The windows could not be opened, and the bathroom doors had no locks and had the upper and lower halves cut off at an angle. That way, the nurses could see the patients as they did their check-ups. Some rooms had no bathroom doors; the patients had torn them off with their bare hands. The nurses did check-ins every 15 minutes, and since I was sharing a room with another patient, privacy did not exist. We were only allowed the clothes we had on into the unit, and that was if they approved them. My sweatpants had their strings cut off during my examination with the nurses.

Not long after, we had our morning group discussion. These were mandatory and were held about three times a day. The group activities seemed childlike. We were given coloring supplies and coloring pages, mazes to do, and get-to-know-me assignments. The rehab patients would state their purpose rather proudly; the suicidal stayed quiet and introverted. The homicidal acted rather extroverted and positive despite their situation, and the convicted felons were quiet, albeit I only met one, charged with second degree murder. At the time, I was unaware what that crime really was, and honestly, it was probably for the best. I was quiet and introverted at first although I began to become much more talkative after the first few days.

As I began to open up around the others, I discovered that the other patients were really just everyday people I would've never normally suspected to have had any sort of problem. We quickly began to get along. It was like a strange little family. We all knew each other's most personal emotions and problems, so we bonded quickly. Every couple of days someone would leave; we would say our farewells, knowing we were likely to never see them again.

We bonded with the nurses as well. Unlike the nurses one would see at a typical hospital, they're much more open and honest. There was one nurse who would give us speeches, preaching that we were young and we had our whole lives ahead of us. She admitted to being a drug abuser when she was younger and eventually turned her life around when she discovered karate. Her sensei had helped her change her life for the better, and now she wanted to help others do the same. It was admirable; I could only hope to one day do the same.

At night, we'd all get together and watch a movie on the TV they had boxed in behind a wall of thick glass. I watched *Moana* for the first time ever, and it has been my favorite movie since. Several of us female patients would ask for it every night, much to the dismay of the guys there. Normally, you'd think they'd separate us by gender, but the nurses didn't really care that

much about it. During the movies, we would go get a cup of ice from the water machine. Ice ended up being half of our diet. We would throw ice at each other, and the nurses would tell us to knock it off, or they'd take out the ice machine. We continued, and they never did take it out.

Occasionally, fights would happen. They did not occur often while I was there, but one of these "Code purple" incidents involved the girl I was rooming with at the time. She had attempted to attack a girl I was conversing with. She ran at her, and I was next to them as the nurses came with the 5-inch needles, tackling her to the ground and restraining her. I was unable to move as they injected her with the syringes. I was frozen until the nurses rushed me to another room along with others who had gathered to watch the outburst. We could hear the screaming, and I felt on edge. Eventually, the screams died down as she passed out and was taken back to our room. She was quiet for a while after that. We were good roommates, and we talked a lot. After the incident, however, the nurses had decided that it would be best if she finished her last days there alone.

Eventually, I was given my first ever medications: Lexapro and Abilify. A few hours after taking my first medication, I had several of the drug-abusing patients point out my eyes. "You look like you're high on marijuana!" one of the male patients had exclaimed, laughing. I checked myself in my room's bathroom mirror. My pupils were so dilated that they nearly took up my whole eyes. I really felt happy within a day after taking them. They numbed me, and all negative emotions seemed to just vanish.

This feeling did not stay forever, sadly. I began to ask more frequently when I was going to be discharged. I had been there for about five or six days already. They would not tell me, probably because they didn't know. There were no clocks, nothing we could do aside from coloring, talking to the other patients, and reading, if we were allowed to do that. Occasionally,

they would swap out the patient rooms during my stay. I ended up with the girl I had first met in the adolescent unit during my first few days. She was incredibly quiet, and whenever she would talk in the group sharing activities, she would say the most emotionless, depressing things I had ever heard. She had begun hurting herself, claiming it was the most she could ever feel. She had detailed how the blood dripping from her arm felt good to her and how addicting it was to watch it drop to the ground. When I roomed with her, I wasn't sure how to really act. She always had a nurse by her side. I remember my first night sleeping in the same room with her that I could feel the nurse looking at me. I cried silently, not daring to move an inch. I wanted out, and I missed being home, even at school. I couldn't stop crying, and I knew the nurse could tell.

The light-blond girl and I began to converse with each other after that. She opened up about her family situation, how every single medication and treatment she had ever been given had never worked. She had been there for months, with no foreseeable release. It broke something in me. I could never imagine not enjoying anything anymore, not being able to be my own person, and never being able to find something I love to do. I had requested sheet music from my music teacher at the time, which she gladly sent to me. Looking at the notes and hearing the melodies in my head brought me comfort. My roommate had nothing she could relate those feelings to. To be completely devoid of all life, to never feel joy or comfort is a fate arguably worse than death.

Eventually, my time there came to an end. I said my goodbyes, and my roommate talked to me one last time. I could feel something genuine coming from her then. "You were a great roommate, Sara." She smiled at me. Not many others dared to talk to her, and she did not bother with it anyway. I looked at her, my heart aching. "I'm sure we'll meet again someday.... I hope

you get better soon.” She seemed to internally deny my last statement; I could both feel and see it in her expression. “Thank you, I hope so, too.”

I have not ever felt the same since. She seemed like she wasn’t alive, just a shell of who she once was. I could never imagine getting to that point. I wonder where she is sometimes, if she ever got out and turned her life around, if she ever relapsed, or if she finally killed herself. I try not to dwell on it very much. That is a fate far outside of my reach. I can only hope that through the years that have passed, she has become much happier. If I could see her again, I’d hug her. I’d thank her for being alive. She seemed so sweet, yet her circumstances would not allow her to be happy. Since then, I have not been as depressed as I was when I entered the hospital. I am much happier now and have my own reasons to continue living.

I hope you have found those reasons too, Skyler.