New York in His Mind

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IN THIS WING of the hospital, friends don't bring flowers or photo collages, and your family doesn't tie balloons to the rails of your hospital bed with "Get Well!" messages and smiley faces. Anything with a string is a harbinger for suicide.

The things we take to my father are inspected each morning. No laptops. No cellphones. No shoes either—it's harder to run away in slippers and socks. Prunes are allowed though, and books. As long as they're not electronic.

On his first night in this foreign place, I leave him with a collection of travel essays. It's the kind of book my father would have left trailing in the bathroom, the kind I used to read furtively after.

When I return the next morning, he has written the names of all the nurses in the margins, rating each one on a scale from 1 to 10.

"Usually," John the Longshoreman confides, "when I come in here, it's in a straitjacket." He hugs his arms tight around his body to demonstrate.

He shows me the bullet wound scars on his calf and thigh. "That's where the police shot me. Under the Mental Health Act." He urges me to feel the one on his thigh. It is soft and jelly-like, like poking at a chicken breast.

John's got this wild look in his eye, a glint of something feral. *Crazy*, I might have called it a few months ago, but *crazy* starts to take on a whole new mean-

ing when you have spent time within these walls. Time on the inside—this is how most patients refer to their life in the Psychiatric Assessment Unit of Vancouver General Hospital. Life in the singular, because life here has been diminished to green and brown pyjamas with elastic waistbands, and meals divided into compartments. Just like on an airplane, except you don't know where your destination will be.

The PAU, after all, is a sort of no man's land for the mysteries of the brain. It's where they put you when they haven't yet determined where you belong. Mood disorder? Schizophrenia? Psychosis? It's also where they put the difficult ones, the ones who are violent or *at risk of elopement*. My father falls into the latter category.

Elopement. Up until now, this is a word I have associated with the 19th-century novels my father first bought me when I was around eleven. It conjures up images of runaway daughters sneaking off into the night to be with their lovers. Now it is my father who is the runaway, who tells me and my mother to leave a bike on 10th Avenue, two wheels to serve as his getaway car.

He plots his escape for the morning of his 64th birthday. He figures his best bet will be through the door next to the shower room with the warning sign: STOP. PATIENTS: DO NOT ENTER THIS HALLWAY. His friend Roy proposes an alternative route through the air vent grille in the TV room. All you have to do is climb up the rickety shelf with a screwdriver, then shimmy your way through the ventilation system.

The first time we walk into the PAU, I am terrified of the other patients. The absence in their expressions, the way they trudge around the ward in circles. Like sleepwalkers, both senseless and awake.

But the circles, I soon realize, are necessary if you want to subsist in this place. At least you have the impression that you are going somewhere, even as the same four scenes are reproduced over and over, as though you are trapped in a revolving door. The nurses' desk. The dining space with the foosball table and puzzles that never seem to be complete. The bedrooms with their doorless bathrooms and windowed doors, exposing the most banal, bare necessities of life. The TV room, dim and crowded.

The majority of these patients have been recycled in and out of the mental healthcare system since their early twenties. My father, undergoing his first hypomanic episode at 63, is an anomaly.

Khawla ambles up to my father and me, her shoulders stooped, burdened by the evil of her own existence. "I am devil," she says. It is her penitence to confess. "Everyone is good, but not me. Because I am devil."

She is originally from Iraq, but was captured by Iranian soldiers during the war. I know not what monstrosities she must have witnessed to see such horror in her own reflection. Only that every evening, when all the other visitors have been shown to the door, her son is allowed to stay behind to cradle her to sleep.

Khawla becomes my father's cause. He learns the Arabic word for *angel* and pursues her around the ward, declaring, "*Malak! Malak*! You are not devil, you are *malak*!"

As it turns out, there is more than one *malak* in this ward. At least in the eyes of Hannah, who tells me that she is an incarnation of the Virgin Mary. In her holy state of mind, angels are omnipresent.

She is nineteen and in love with a boy named Ben. Yet even teenage rapture cannot overcome religious fervor, as she fantasizes of an immaculate conception.

Her father is an evangelical pastor. Every evening, he comes to read the bible with her. Sometimes she is serene, heavenly. Other times, hysterical, she runs from him. Sobbing uncontrollably until the nurses lock her away.

"Your daughter wants to be a missionary," she tells my father.

He scowls at her. "My daughter does NOT want to be a missionary."

Despite himself, despite how he may now misconstrue my every action, my every word, there is still some reality to what he knows about me. And a part of me is glad.

"My daughter could have been a mathematician!" he used to tell his friends.

"She could have been an engineer!" Feigning indignance, and yet secretly proud when I majored in French and Creative Writing.

Bipolar II disorder. Also known as manic depression. This is my father's official diagnosis.

When the doctor, with clinical detachment, delivers this news, I do not tell him that I already knew. I do not tell him that weeks before we first set foot in the PAU, I stayed up until one in the morning filling out mental health self-assessment tests in my father's place because I could no longer recognize his voice.

Are you much more talkative than usual? Yes. Do you see or hear things that others cannot? No. Are your thoughts racing? Yes. Do you have an inflated sense of self-worth? Yes. Do you feel high as a kite? Yes.

Imagine you are your father. Not the one who built you a windmill out of a tree, but the one who snarls at you now to *shut up shut up shut up and listen*. You will never be able to walk a mile in his shoes, because these shoes do not fit the man you know to be your father. Yet you must gather up your bewilderment, your terror, your horror. Only then can you process the rest through a yes/no questionnaire.

And maybe, just maybe, I can begin to understand.

"Hey Yusif," my father calls out. "What do you think of ISIS?"

My father, along with his sleep, has lost all sense of political correctness. He has become adept at the art of racial classification. He asks every Filippina nurse if her name is Baby or June, informing them that these are the top two names among the Manila bikini bar girls. He calls a Zimbabwean nurse "Mugabe" for threatening to inject him if he refuses to take his medication. "You're a dictator," he hurls at the nurse. "Come here you coward!" And I am hurling too, begging my father to stop, please stop, for my sake, for my mother's sake. Knowing that if I cannot restrain him, he will be restrained.

Yusif, though, just grins at him, his nicotine inhaler hanging out of the left

side of his mouth. "Motherfuckers."

Yusif knows how to use the word *fuck* in all its morphological variations.

"You know what I eat for breakfast?" he asks my father. "Sheep's head. I eat the brain too. That's why my brain's all fucked up."

"Mi kham shir!" my father proclaims to Roy.

Roy, his appointed Farsi teacher, is impressed. "Wow! That's SO GOOD."

My father, leaning back on his chair, pumps his arms and legs in the air like he's sprinting. I have never seen him this excited before.

Learning how to speak a new language is just one of the many hobbies my father has picked up in the last few weeks. Before his hospitalization, he was cultivating a hydroponic garden, writing a travel blog, researching family ties with an Australian author, campaigning for a local politician and learning how to play the piano again. He claims that he has got his mojo back, his pinkie raised in homage to Austin Powers and Dr. Evil.

"Your dad's so smart," Roy says.

I don't know what to say. My father, I want to tell him, taught me how to make a three-dimensional star out of paper. He taught me how to solve kinematic equations and calculate the derivative of a function. *Can't you see*? he used to thunder at me, waving his thumb in my face. *It's sticking out at you like a sore thumb*.

My father, I want to explain, has a Master's degree in electrical engineering. Before he was admitted to the PAU, my mother found him one morning in tears, threatening to rip up the only copy of his thesis, painstakingly drawn up on a typewriter four decades earlier. "It's garbage," he told her. "It's embarrassing."

Now my father uses his logic to draw a multicolored graph documenting his sleep pattern from birth to present day. Proving to the doctors by mathematical means that 1.5 to 3 hours of sleep a night is sufficient. He supports his claims with theories on Rapid Eye Movement sleep and Hollywood films. "I want to be like Forrest Gump," he tells them. "When I'm tired, I'll sleep. Otherwise I'll just keep on going."

Twelve patients are in a psychiatric ward. One escapes, three fall into a medically

induced sleep and five are locked up in isolation rooms. How many are left wandering the halls?

The group session takes place at ten in the morning. The head nurse gathers all the patients together. Even the ones who have been confined are, if only for a half hour, set free.

I struggle to understand the rules that dictate their confinement. If you are enraged, you will be locked up. If you are despondent, you will be locked up. And if you are happy, your joy too bountiful for this place where excess of any kind must be kept in check, you will also be locked up. Or at least given a pill that will subdue any inclination you may have to feel.

My father, as he does each morning, declines to participate. Visitors may join in, but they are scarce this early in the day. There is only one other family member, the daughter of a man who has not slept in four days. For her too, it is the first time. Only those for whom mental illness has not yet become routine linger here for so long. I also know because of the way she cries.

Even if my father will not take part, I decide that I will. It is a novel way to escape him, to evade the rage that governs his unblinking eyes. His voice, colorless yet unyielding. My father is angry with me today. My father, it seems, is angry with me every day.

The session begins with stretching, followed by an icebreaker. Today's theme is, *What country would you like to visit?* The question, uninspired in any circumstance, is preposterous here. Almost cruel. Even I, not obliged to spend my nights here, find it difficult to see beyond these walls. But I know how to make up stories. I tell them that I want to go to Colombia. That I want to ride a motorbike across the country and feel the wind whip my hair into knots.

We are to wait for him at my uncle's house, near Cambie, to call for a taxi that will take us to the airport. All three of us will board a flight to New York, our plane already eastward bound before the night nurses have finished their shift. In my father's mind, he is already racing through the somber streets of

early dawn, furiously pedaling towards the Manhattan cityscape, a statue bearing a torch to light his way. 4,601 kilometres to liberty.

Of course, it would never have happened that way. Most likely, he wouldn't even have made it out the door. And if he had, within seconds, security guards would have caught him at the perimeter of the hospital, bearing him down to the damp, cold ground. He would have been constrained, a needle jabbed into his vein. And when my mother and I arrived at the hospital the following day, the nurses would have turned us away. *No visits today*.

I am the reason my father wants to go to New York.

"My daughter," he tells the doctors, "lives in Switzerland. She hardly ever comes home. It's my birthday, so I want to take her to New York, PLEASE."

I moved from Vancouver to Geneva five years ago to become a translator, leaving behind my hometown and a steady boyfriend. In many ways, it was also a getaway from my parents, my visits home becoming increasingly sporadic.

My father says to me, "You're feeling guilty aren't you?" He hurls at me lyrics from Mike and the Mechanics. "Say it LOUD. Say it CLEAR. It's TOO LATE when WE DIE."

Even my father's birthday would not have been an occasion to come back, had he not collapsed on a neighbour's porch, his brain short-circuiting from lack of sleep. Manic to the point of seizure.

We tell him we have booked the tickets. We tell him we will bring him the bike. We beg him to wait just a few more hours, just one more night. The doctors, we say, will come around. Without a doubt, they will let him go.

My father, in his madness, cannot see through our fictions.

The patients are watching *In the Heat of the Night*.

It is one of my father's favorites. I remember him standing at the kitchen

doorway with a scowl on his face, declaring, "They call me Mr. Tibbs!" Even back then, always quoting from films. As though his manic self were merely a hyperbole of his former self.

"It's a funny movie, isn't it?" John the Longshoreman says. "Old movies are always funny." He is already cackling, overcome by the hilarity he perceives in everything.

On screen, James Patterson points the barrel of his gun at Sidney Poitier.

The nurses do not like me conversing with the other patients. They do not like me walking circles around the ward with Roy. Gentle Roy who breaks his sandwiches in half to give to Khawla. Kind Roy who tells me that he used to be in a gang, that he first met John in a psychiatric prison. I can barely make out the tattoos that creep out the sleeves and v-neck of his pyjama top.

I wonder what would happen if we were to meet somewhere Out There. If we were to run into each other in the aisles of a supermarket, between the spices and the canned soups. The recollection of a face. A slight nod. The realization that ultimately, there is nothing that ever truly bound us together except those white walls we once existed within.

Indeed, we will run into each other. Not necessarily on the outside, but inevitably in other wards, as patients are shuffled from one mental health facility to the other. Roy will later tell us how he comes back to visit Khawla. How he presses the doorbell at the entrance to the PAU and waits as the nurses discern his familiar face on their monitors. They will not let him in. Not because his hulking frame is now clothed in black and he is wearing gold chains, but because they do not want a friendship bred of two unhealthy minds.

"Can you just sit down?" one of the nurses finally says to me. "Sit down or leave."

But the other patients are the only way I can find reprieve from my father's monologues. From his cold, implacable rage. Even when my mother and I are alone, we find ourselves unable to converse. We are a study in recapitulation.

Away from him, we spend our moments scanning memories for the ways in which we could have known.

From whence has this madness sprung? How can it be that we never spotted the seeds of it, startled only by the folly that flowered, that seemed not human, and above all, not him?

I come up with a plan of my own. If my father cannot bring me to New York, I will bring New York to him. Like the time I went to Paris with my seventh-grade French class and brought the city back to him in a baguette. Something within me still that child and hopeful.

I dream up the perfect escape package. How to get away without going anywhere. I will buy a wall decal sticker of a sign pointing the way to Central Park and Madison Avenue, and a miniature model of a yellow cab with a checkered stripe. I will make a recording of "Memory" and "Don't Cry for Me, Argentina."

When the dawn comes, tonight will be a memory too and a new day will begin.

The doctors speak of chemical imbalances in my father's brain. They speak of serotonin, dopamine and noradrenaline. I do not understand these terms, cannot grasp the meaning of an imbalance that cannot be measured. Instead, I learn to assess the progression of his mania through his inflections, through the frenzy that regulates his words.

My father calls us before we have left for the hospital. As soon as my mother and I hear his voice over the phone, we know that today is not going to be a good day.

On his birthday, this birthday that was to be his own *Great Escape* or *Shawshank Redemption*, retribution against the nurses is instead the object of his fixation. All thoughts of New York seem to have evaporated, as ephemeral as the delusions that once fed his desire for flight.

They congregate around us, the inhabitants of the PAU. It is a send-off of their own volition. Even Yusif, who has been confined for railing at a nurse, waves at us through his rectangular window.

How long have we been here? Weeks? Months? If I were to check off the dates on my calendar, it would only be a matter of days. Six perhaps, eight at most. But I cannot say for sure, because time here has ceased to play out in any linear fashion.

My father, no longer considered a safety risk, will not be walking circles around the PAU anymore. His rotation through the psychiatric healthcare system, however, has just begun. He will be moved to West One, a unit where patients are not obliged to wear pajamas and can smoke on the terrace out front. Where a half-hour pass to Starbucks is called a *privilege*.

And more freedom for my father means that outside the hospital will no longer be refuge. My mother and I will have to accompany him each time he is given permission to go out for dinner or spend a night at home. We will find ourselves tracking the darting of his eyes, as though suspended. Always anticipating what he will do next. Who he will approach next. Not that there will ever be any escaping the mania. His mania, which, even when I have fled back to Geneva, will drive me out of bed at night and have me feverishly writing at my living room table, as though through words, I can grasp at the unfathomable.

It is a departure of sorts. The kind where there is no such thing as leaving.