

Love on a Psych Ward

Sunday was slow on the psych ward. Most people were dozing on the Day Room couches in front of the blaring television. Louis and I were working on a jigsaw puzzle depicting horses running in the snow. Bored, he came up with a better way to pass the time.

“Want to make out?” he said with a grin. Louis had crazy, tousled hair that begged to be tamed with gel (contraband on the ward). He had a heavy beard, as he was not allowed to use a razor. And Louis always lounged around the ward in a filthy, blue bathrobe. He reminded me of Hawkeye Pierce.

I had been flirting with—and lusting after—Louis ever since my arrival on this psych ward two days earlier. I looked at his twinkling eyes, and they were so bright and alive, unlike so many of the other patients whose eyes were dark and vacant.

So we went behind the piano in the rarely used living room and started to kiss. Louis was a good kisser, despite his scratchy beard and sour sweat smell. Psych patients aren’t known for their good hygiene.

I fumbled my hand under his bathrobe, but Louis was kissing me so sweetly, I didn’t want to cheapen this. So I pulled my hand out and rested it gently on his knee. For a moment, I wasn’t a psych ward patient. I was a girl with her first crush.

We kissed until we heard a staff member approaching and ran, giggling, into the kitchen.

“Why are you here?” I asked him as we sat eating graham crackers and peanut butter in the kitchen, the zombie hall pacers drifting back and forth outside the door, mumbling to themselves.

“It’s a good place to hide out from the Chinese Mafia,” he told me in a whisper. “They’re planting all sorts of car bombs all over the Upper East Side, trying to kill me. What about you?”

I was on the ward after going to the airport at 12:00 a.m. to buy a plane ticket to the first place available, which happened to be Dallas, Texas. Upon arriving in Dallas, I proceeded to live in the airport for a few days, hanging out in the airport bar and then sleeping on the benches in the waiting area until an ex-boyfriend rescued me and put me on a plane back home.

“My mother and my doctor thought I was ‘out of control,’” I told Louis, using air quotes. He nodded with understanding.

I was used to having “bad episodes” during which I was either catatonically depressed, staying in bed for weeks, or experiencing psychosis and creating all sorts of mayhem.

I was used to trying to sweep these bad times under the rug when I cycled out of them, convincing my friends and family to forget about them and move on. But, deep down, I knew they never really forgot. And this time, it seemed I had gone too far.

It occurred to me that relationships were much easier on the psych ward. These people were in the midst of their own bad episodes. They needed neither explanation nor apology.

We stood in line a lot on the psych ward. For blood pressure check. For meds. For meals. And for cigarettes.

We were allowed two cigarettes every couple of hours. The nurse's aides took us down to the fenced-in courtyard, lit our cigarettes for us, and gave us ten minutes to smoke our butts. Louis and I sat on a wooden picnic table and sucked them down.

One afternoon, I saw Louis hide a cigarette in his bathrobe pocket.

"For Loretta," he whispered, his finger over his mouth. Loretta was the skeletal woman across the hall from me who, for some reason, had been sequestered to her room. She yelled all day long to be taken out for a cigarette.

I didn't know how she would light the cigarette or smoke it in her room without the staff noticing, but Louis's gesture was the nicest thing I'd ever seen anyone do.

Later that week, as we returned from a smoke break, I was overwhelmed by the sounds on the ward. The cacophony of sound crashed over me like a tsunami. It was strangely physically painful. The sounds took on colors: I saw blue when the vacuum cleaner hummed, yellow when Loretta screamed to be let out of her room for a cigarette, orange as the TV blared a Spanish channel—even though there were no Spanish-speaking people on the ward.

I hid in my shower stall, the tiles muting the noise outside. But when I refused to get out of the shower, a big nurse's aide named Norman slammed me against the wall. Pinned down, I did the only thing I could to protest: I spit in his face. He angrily called the rest of the staff, who came running and dragged me limp into the Quiet Room.

I laid there in the padded cell for what felt like hours. My breathing slowed down. I seemed to have peed on myself in all the excitement. I stared out the barred window at the sky beyond and wondered how my life had gotten to this point.

I could hear the smokers back out in the courtyard after a while. It sounded like the staff were letting them shoot hoops.

"I'm still here in the Quiet Room," I telepathed to Louis, and I pictured him smiling back up at me.

"Keep the faith, kid," he messaged back before shooting another hoop and then falling backward into a pile of dry leaves.

When I got out, the other patients welcomed me back. Louis had saved me a pudding from dinner. We all sat in the Day Room watching the Olympics.

"This is my fourth time in the hospital," a girl named Natasha told us out of nowhere. She liked to throw things: books, a lamp, food in the dining room. She was a frequent guest of the Quiet Room.

"This is my tenth," said a grey-haired man sitting in the corner by himself. He was reading the newspaper upside down.

I saw my future mapped out before me: a revolving door in and out of psych wards. Louis quietly put his hand over mine as though he knew I was afraid. I was keenly aware of the contact. I wanted to change positions on the couch but didn't because I didn't want to lose the connection.

"No physical contact between patients," was a big rule on the ward. This taboo touch, so close to the nurse's aides sitting watching TV with us, was exhilarating.

A few days later, Louis and I were back kissing again behind the piano when we got busted by another staff member.

"You're on thin ice, Alison," she said. I was not a popular patient after the spitting incident and because

I had called patient legal services to complain about my treatment by Norman. A brief investigation had taken place, and Norman had been acquitted of all wrongdoing. But it was clear the staff was still angry at me.

"Don't make us sequester you to your room," the nurse said with a frown. Was that what had happened to Loretta? Too many strikes against her with staff? Louis and I got up sheepishly and went into the kitchen.

"I like you," I told him. "But I think we need to cool it. I'm in enough trouble here as it is."

"I know," he said sweetly.

"Can we be friends?" I asked.

"Of course," he said, squeezing my hand. There was none of the drama of "real-world" breakups. We went from lusting after each other to making the grown-up choice to just be friends. It occurred to me that my relationship with Louis, as short-lived as it was, was the healthiest relationship I'd ever been in.

Over a year passed, and I was hospitalized again. I had swallowed a bottle of Klonopin after being rejected by another boyfriend. I thought he would love me more if I tried to harm myself, or at least feel guilty. In reality, he just thought it was cool that a chick had tried to kill herself over him.

I don't remember the first couple of days on the ward as I slept most of the time, detoxing from my overdose. When I woke up, I realized I was on a different floor of the same hospital, and this staff seemed nicer. They didn't seem to know about the spitting incident. But I was lonely.

Then I saw Louis. He was still in his blue bathrobe. Did he ever get out?

We gave each other a big hug until the staff told us to stop the physical contact. It felt like we grew up together, went to high school together.

"I got a job at a bagel shop after the last hospitalization," he told me with pride. Then he frowned. "They fired me because I wouldn't serve the Chinese Mafia people who came in to spy on me."

The reasons we were back here lost importance. Now it was just about surviving another hospitalization. Together.

It was summer, and the staff took us to the swimming pool on hospital grounds. Louis lounged around in his blue bathrobe, overseeing the bathers like a disheveled Hugh Hefner.

"You look hot in your swimsuit," Louis told me, despite the gut I had courtesy of the antipsychotic medication I had been prescribed since my last incarceration. I was grateful for his flattery as I felt like a big blob.

I dove into the pool and swam butterfly laps. I had been a competitive swimmer before I became a psych ward patient. As I swam, I pretended I was back in the college pool, back to a time before all the bad episodes. Louis waved to me with a big smile every time I came up to the wall for a breath.

Louis was released a few days after the pool party. When he left the ward, I was out on a smoke break, so I didn't get to say goodbye. But he called me several times a day on the patient pay phone to update me on all the car bombs he was avoiding.

Clearly, he was released too soon.

I decided to complete a puzzle in his honor. A difficult one-thousand-piece puzzle depicting rows and rows of Oreo cookies.

As the other patients sat watching game shows on TV, I huddled down at the crafts table and worked

on the painstaking project as an homage to Louis, as if he had passed away. Given its difficulty, I spent all my time on it other than during meals, smoke breaks, or mandatory groups. And, of course, during my frequent calls from Louis himself.

When it finally came down to the last few pieces, I had an adrenaline rush — until I realized there was a piece missing. I searched everywhere for it: the floor, my chair, the box, even the shelf with all the other puzzles and games on it. Nothing.

“Fuck!” I yelled, and I grabbed handfuls of the puzzle I’d been working so hard on and threw them across the room, hitting some of my fellow patients.

A nice nurse named Anne came and took my arm. I thought she was going to escort me to the Quiet Room. Instead, she kindly took me outside for a private smoke break.

“Anne, that puzzle is a metaphor for my life,” I said, sobbing. “There will always be a piece missing.”

Soon after the puzzle disaster, Louis abruptly stopped calling.

I kept checking the message board to see if someone had taken a call from him and written it down. I hung out by the pay phones instead of in the Day Room, eagerly answering every call that came in. But he never called again.

And eventually, I was released too.