

## I Was a Mental Patient

# Entering Hospital Easier Than Exit

*'For the First Time, I Realized . . . My Isolation'*

*After receiving many complaints about the Kings County Hospital psychiatric division, the World-Telegram assigned Staff Writer Michael Mok to investigate. Without the knowledge of any authorities, he won admission as a patient after telling a carefully prepared story of emotional difficulties. Today he tells how he managed to leave—after some worrisome hours.*

**By MICHAEL MOK,**

*World-Telegram Staff Writer.*

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The day I got out of Kings County Hospital had a nightmarish quality, as if I were tobogganning out of control toward a barbed-wire fence.

It began with another spoon hunt.

We were searched and herded out of the day room.

"No man smokes until the spoon is found," said the attendant. He sounded as if he hoped it would never be recovered.

After we spent 40 minutes longing for a cigaret, the scullery maid again discovered she had miscounted the spoons and the smoking lamp was lit.

**Very Pretty Nurse.**

The day nurse, a very pretty girl who called the patients "mister," apologized for having falsely ac-

cused us of stealing the silverware. This girl was one of many staff members of Kings County who went out of their way to be kind to the patients.

It was time to make the beds, and I joined the working party, which, as usual, consisted predominantly of men with previous institutional experience.

**Ex-convicts**—and men who had spent time in Veterans' Administration hospitals—adjusted better to the routine in Kings County than any others.

These old salts knew how to be on the receiving end when anything was to be had: They knew how to hide clean sheets in the padding of a wheelchair when clean sheets were at a premium, or how to get extra food when supplies were short.

**Snatching Clean Sheets.**

They were adept at snatching clean sheets off the beds of others and switching them to their own; and they knew which attendants were vulnerable to a bribe of a dollar or two for performing such forbidden favors as making an outside phone call for them. We were not permitted to have money or matches, but

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# Getting Into Hospital Easier Than Leaving

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these men could be counted on to have both.

After the bed making, it was time for showers and the issuance of clean pajamas—while the supply lasted. I noticed that the institutional types had managed to get into the sets; I got clean trousers only.

Then I was summoned to see my psychiatrist.

Our session came about at my request, because I wanted to know what the hospital was planning to do with me.

This interview lasted just a few moments, in contrast to the first meeting, which was 20 minutes long. The doctor said that three courses of action were open:

I might be retained at the hospital for further observation; I might be committed to a state mental hospital; or I might be released, which added that his decision would have to be backed up by the judgment of his immediate superior, whom I might see very soon.

**Is There Any Appeal?**

Just suppose, I asked, that you both decide I must be sent to a state hospital—then what? Will my wife have any say in the matter? Is there any appeal?

The psychiatrist explained that after he and his colleague made such a recommendation, it was presented to a State Supreme Court Justice, who visits the hospital three times a week. One's wife or nearest of kin is notified of this proceeding.

The possibility of my being transferred to a state hospital had also frightened my wife when she learned of it on the previous visiting day. She immediately requested permission to see my psychiatrist. He was not available so another doctor talked to her.

She said she had just heard that patients are often sent from Kings County to state mental institutions, and said the idea made her nervous.

"I'm not really familiar with your husband's case," the doctor said at that time, "so I can't say what, if anything, will be decided."

**'You'd Feel Better.'**

"But I do want to say that the only reason that you balk at the idea of a state hospital is because you are ignorant of them," the psychiatrist continued. "If you knew the excellent care he would receive, you'd feel much better."

"You may be right," my wife said. "Is there any chance of my inspecting the facilities of the hospital to which he might be sent—before any decision is made?"

"The families of patients are not permitted to inspect hospitals. You could look at them from the outside, or visit him on visiting days, but that would be the extent of your inspection."

Since neither my wife nor I felt particularly enlightened by our separate interviews, I was delighted when

an attendant called me to see a senior psychiatrist. Despite his important post, he, too, interviewed me in a cluttered cubicle.

This doctor questioned me shrewdly and as the interview progressed, I began to relax. He obviously had a wealth of common sense and I knew he would not make a hasty judgment which might affect the entire course of my life.

**The Psychiatrist's Decision.**

As we talked, it occurred to me that it is much easier to pretend insanity than to persuade someone you're normal.

At the end of the interview, the doctor gave me his decision:

"If you give me your word that you will seek psychiatric help as an out-patient, I will release you to the custody of your wife—as soon as she can come here and sign you out."

Reaching for the telephone on my desk, I asked whether I might call her, or whether he might make the call for me.

**'She'll Help You.'**

"I'm sorry—patients are not allowed to make outside calls. Just tell the social worker what the situation is and she'll help you."

I went back to Ward 33 elated. I was so happy that I even felt compassion for a repellent, bottle-shaped boy standing in the corner, whose greediness usually spoiled breakfast, lunch and supper.

I went to the nurses' station and told an attendant that I had urgent business with the social worker and asked her to tell the woman I wanted to see her.

Without even looking up, the aide said she'd take care of it.

**Desperation Sets In.**

An hour passed; then two. I went back to the nurses' station and repeated my request to the attendant, who had not stirred from the cage. Almost angrily, she said she had promised to take care of it and she would.

I began to feel desperate.

Sometimes a couple of days would pass without the social worker coming to the ward, and she had already visited us earlier that morning.

I button-holed a male attendant who had shown consideration to me in the past, and asked if he'd make the phone call for me, intimating that I would make it worth his while.

"I can't do it, man," he said sympathetically. "If anyone found out it would cost me my job."

Later in the Day.

Feeling more and more helpless, I sought out a young gangster type, a patient who had always impressed me with his resourcefulness.

The youth promised he would try to help: One of the attendants in another ward acted as his contact with the outside world, and later in the day he might have a chance to speak to him.

I thanked him, but I was not reassured. It seemed to me that I might well have to wait until the next visiting day for my wife to come and, if the senior psychiatrist were unavailable, we'd be out of luck.

For the first time, I realized fully the extent of my isolation from the world outside. I was completely cut off.

After another endless hour, I walked restlessly to the corridor door and peered out of the vision slot. What I saw was unbelievable: there, dressed in her best clothes, was my wife.

**Chief Psychiatrist.**

I was permitted to enter the ward, and she quickly explained: She had decided, on her own, to see the chief psychiatrist to discuss my future.

As soon as she introduced herself, the doctor told her of his decision to release me to her and she had signed me out.

By this time I was in no mood to dally. I went to the nurses' station and got the cigarettes I had left for safe-keeping and distributed them to my friends among the patients. I had an impulse to kiss the pretty nurse goodbye, but didn't.

**The Last Time.**

An attendant led up out of the ward and I heard the rattly-click of its two doors for the last time. My wife got

off at the main floor, and the attendant and I went to the basement to get my clothes.

As I was dressing—the sensation of putting on my own clothes for the first time in eight days was exhilarating—the attendant said wistfully that he wished he were leaving Kings County.

I met my wife in the lobby and we walked outside. It was raining and the fresh drops felt good on my face.

I turned back for a last look, and someone I couldn't see shouted out of the window:

"Go home!"

I did.

**TOMORROW:**  
A woman patient tells an even grimmer story about Building G.

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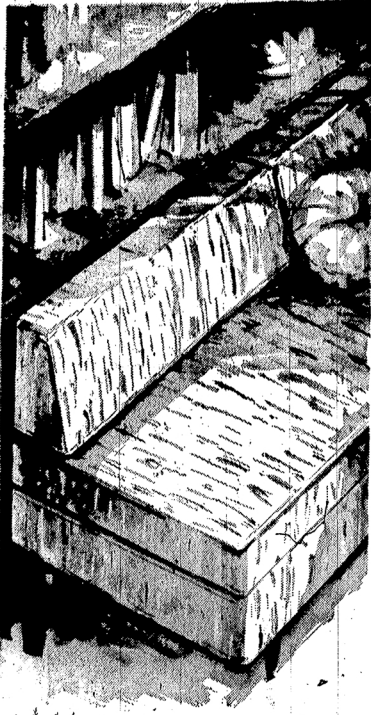
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