

I Was a Mental Patient

Outside World Helps Lessen Boredom

After receiving many complaints about the Kings County Hospital psychiatric division, the World-Telegram last month assigned staff writer Michael Mok to investigate. Without the knowledge of any authority, he told a carefully prepared story of emotional difficulties and won admission as a patient. He spent eight days there. Today he describes visiting day.

By MICHAEL MOK,

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Visiting day dawned bleak and rainy, and after breakfast I queued up for the business of the dull razor blade.

Visitors were allowed from 2 to 3:30 p.m. on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays—the only days we were permitted to shave in Ward 31. It worked this way:

An attendant unlocked a room with two deep sinks, laid out hand soap, shaving brushes and three safety razors, and then let us in three at a time. If you

were at the head of the line you were fortunate, because the razors were passed from man to man.

As a safety precaution, the handles of the razors were locked in such a way that the blades could not be removed without a special key. There were no mirrors.

Afterward, I played chess with a boy who looked about 9 years old but I was too distracted to play intelligently. So I excused myself and began walking around the ward.

In one corner of the day room, a television set was blaring away as usual. The set, in a wooden box high on the wall, was turned on early in the morning and played continually, except for meal times, when an attendant would turn it off.

From time to time, a patient would switch channels, but most of the time people just took what came, or tried to ignore it.

Some men passed the time with playing cards brought by visitors—the most popular games were whist and pinochle—and Ward 31 had a board for

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Outside World Helps Break Hospital Boredom

But Visiting Day Is Tough For Neglected Inmates

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checkers and chess. Visitors brought books and occasionally the nurses' aides would give us newspapers.

A couple of times a week we were taken to the gymnasium. Some of the men shot baskets, others played catch, and still more just ran around. Since all these activities were going on at once, serious sport was out of the question.

Most of the time we just sat. Conversation was possible but it often ended in irrationality. A man I had never seen before started chatting with me this way: "I used to see your sister and her dog out shoveling snow all the time."

My sister does not shovel snow, nor does she have a dog.

Food Excellent, Boredom Insufferable

Two men used to tell me at length about the people they thought they had killed. When you listen to this sort of talk all day long, it is like listening to a gall bladder patient tell you about his operation.

Boredom became almost insufferable. The temptation to over-eat was great, because the food, although simple, was excellent. Several men helped out in the ward's little kitchen for whatever extra food they could get.

As visiting time crept nearer, one of the kitchen helpers came up to me with a conspiratorial look on his face and confided that he somehow had got 17 oranges which he was going to give to his wife when she came.

"I've got four kids and oranges cost maybe six or 10 cents on the outside," he said. I congratulated him, wondering privately how he had managed to conceal his loot from some of our light-fingered fellow patients.

It was impossible to put anything down in the ward and not have it stolen. I had the eerie experience of putting down my toothpaste tube and having it vanish almost instantly. To leave cigarettes anywhere would be like leaving money on the floor of a subway car.

Possessions Carried in Bags

Because of the thievery, many men carried their few possessions in shopping bags wherever they went. Others chose to have their cigarettes tagged with their names, and turned them in to the nurses' station for safekeeping. The drawback of this plan was that when you wanted to get something out of the nurses' station, the person on duty might be too busy or too hurried to pay any attention to you.

Visiting hours were important not only for the human contact with the people from outside, but because they often brought the creature comforts the hospital did not provide.

On this particular visiting day I was anxious to see my wife because I had been over-generous with my cigarettes and had been without tobacco for eight hours. After lunch I wanted a cigarette badly.

By 12:30 p.m., the children were already at the windows, hoping to catch sight of early visitors. They were anxious to see anybody's visitors.

At 1:20, one of the boys who had seen my wife the week before shouted to me: "Hey! Come over here, quick!"

I ran to the window and there she was; A tall girl, carrying a shopping bag through the rain.

Embrace Draws Maid's Complaint

The hands of the clock dawdled toward 2 p.m. I was beside myself with impatience. Several of the boys were pressing their noses to the vision slot of the corridor door.

Two o'clock came and went.

At 2:10 p.m., a couple of attendants carried a table and chair to the door in a leisurely fashion. One took out his key and rattley-click—the door swung open. I could see that several of the visitors had their noses pressed to the vision slot of the outer door, which was opened at last.

As the visitors filed past the desk, the attendants fumbled through their packages, looking for matches, razor blades, pens, pencils and other contraband.

My wife walked quickly into the day room and threw her arms around my neck.

"Don't you know this is a HOSPITAL!" whined a kitchen maid, who was going by with a mop as we embraced.

Ignoring her, my wife and I went to a dining room table and sat down. First she showed me the books, newspapers and cigarettes she had brought.

Towel Denied—It's Not Needed

She said she had brought me a towel, too, but was not allowed to give it to me. "They said you wouldn't need it."

I grinned, because I had yet to see a towel in Kings County Hospital. When we showered, an attendant pulled stuff out of a bag for us to dry on. Some times we'd get a sheet, other times a pair of pajamas.

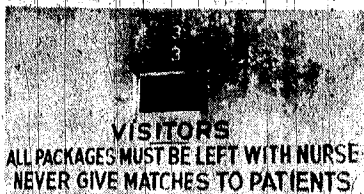


Photo by Palumbo.

Visitors leaving the elevator encounter this door—the first of two securing the locked ward where staff writer Mok spent part of his stay. Many press their noses to the vision slot, in the hope of glimpsing a loved one inside.

The articles were passed from hand to hand until they were too wet to be of further use, and others were given out.

When we washed and shaved, we took turns drying on a bed sheet. These were always clean to start with—my objection was sharing them with others of uncertain health.

Before she left, my wife produced a chicken which she had roasted for me. I thanked her, but told her to bring no more food because our problem was not a lack of food, but rather the temptation to overeat because of boredom.

When visiting hour was over, I walked to the back of the ward and into the corridor, where the men and boys who had no visitors had been sitting.

Dejection Among the Ignored

Feeling guilty because I had had a visitor and they had had none, I passed around some cigarettes. At any other time there would have been a wild scramble, but now it didn't seem to matter to them. They were too dejected to be interested in such simple things.

Little Larry, who had not had a visitor since he was admitted, was nervously pounding his fists against the wall.

But Victor, a rugged-looking man of 35, was in even worse shape.

"My wife promised she'd come today. I kept looking at the door and looking at the door until the last moment, but she didn't come."

I noticed that Victor was crying, but that tears were only coming out of one eye. I had never seen anyone cry with one eye before.

"You know I'm an addict," Victor said. "But because I've been in the hospital for a while, my body doesn't need the stuff any more."

"But if I were outside now and could get a fix, I would . . ."

I left him then, because there was nothing to say, and because I was preoccupied with the idea of moving to another ward.

I wanted to see for myself what Ward 51—the ward for the most violent cases—was like, but talking to other patients had made me cautious. They said people who created violent disturbances were given truth drugs.

This might not be true, but if I were given drugs of any kind I might talk too much. So that was out.

Old timers in Kings County also said that if you kicked up even a minor fuss in Ward 31 you would

be transferred—probably to Ward 33. I decided to get troublesome, but not too troublesome.

At 1:30 a.m., I slid soundlessly out of my bed. I put my toothbrush, toothpaste and cigarettes on the window sill, so it wouldn't look as if I had packed for a trip.

I ambled past the nurses' station as if in a fog and began shaking the door to the outside corridor violently. A nurse seized my arm and I shook her off roughly.

"Where do you think you're going?" she demanded.

"I want to go home—I want to go home and by God, you're not going to stop me!"

As I paced up and down in front of the door, from time to time peering out of the vision slot, I heard an urgent telephone conversation behind me:

"Doctor! I have a patient blowing up and you'd better get down here right away . . ."

"Hello? This is the duty nurse on 31. One of the patients has flipped and you'd better get me some help . . ."

Seconds later a doctor and an attendant had me in tow.

Rattley-click, rattley-click, we were out of Ward 31.

Rattley-click, rattley-click, we were in Ward 33. From the moment I first looked around, I knew that this was going to be different.

TOMORROW: Life in Ward 33.

Staff writer Mok describes its tragic and terrifying patients.