



# New York World-Telegram

and  
**The Sun**

Local Forecast: Fair, cold tonight. Tomorrow increasing cloudiness. Weather Fotocast on Page 41.

REGISTRATION  
Reg. U.S. Pat. Off.

VOL. 128—NO. 104—

Second class postage paid at New York, N. Y.  
and at additional mailing offices.

NEW YORK, FRIDAY, MARCH 17, 1961

Copyright, 1961.  
By New York World-Telegram Corp. TEN CENTS

**I Was a Mental Patient**

## Ward 51— Nightmare Of Violence

*After receiving many complaints about the Kings County Hospital psychiatric division, the World-Telegram last month assigned staff writer Michael Mok to investigate the Brooklyn institution. Without the knowledge of any authorities, he told a carefully prepared story of emotional difficulties and managed to win admission to the psychiatric division as a patient. He spent eight days there. Today he tells of his first contacts with fellow patients.*

**By MICHAEL MOK,**

*World-Telegram Staff Writer.*  
(Copyright, 1961, by New York World-Telegram Corp.)

Larry was the smallest patient in Ward 31 and one of the most disturbed. He was also the first one to be friendly to me.

He said he was 13 years old but he was the size of a well-developed 7-year-old. By his own account, he has been bouncing in and out of mental hospitals for years, but it was hard to see that anything was wrong with him.

Little by little it came out: Larry thought he had a brother who looked exactly like him and who was continually doing evil things for which he, Larry, always got the blame.

"One time I wouldn't take all of it, though," Larry said. "My brother got my little sister down on the floor and kept jumping up and down on her face until she was all bloody and screaming.

"They said I had to go away for four years that ~~was~~, and I said that's too much blame for me to take even for my brother, so he did two years and I did two years. . . ."

Then he added, almost inconsequentially: "I love everybody in my family but I hate my sister."

When I first saw Larry he introduced himself by saying: "My name is Larry. Let me show you the piano room."

He took me to a small room off the corridor leading to the locked sleeping dormitories. It was furnished

Continued on page 24.

# Nightmare of Violence Lurks in Ward 51

(Continued From Page One)

with a couple of large tables, some chairs and a battered piano. There were 17 people listening, or perhaps trying not to listen, to a young man who was striking a series of chords over and over and over again.

I later learned that whenever the room was open, he did this all day long. His pounding set my teeth on edge, but as their patient, a professional violinist, suffered horribly. He told me that those chords caused him the most excruciating pain he experienced in the hospital. Wherever the piano-pounder went he carried a book with him, and I noticed now that it was on top of the piano.

## Tension Mounts as Trio Enters.

Suddenly the tension in the crowded room heightened. Three effeminate young men strutted in. Their leader, Leroy, had a mincing walk, swishing gestures and the habit of calling children "Sweet Cake."

The trio began skylarking and grabbing at each other as if playing tag, and then Leroy seized the book from the piano.

The chord-pounder sprang up and went for Leroy's throat as if he wanted to bite it out.

The action electrified the man called Billy who had spent time in Sing Sing. The ex-convict got between the fighters, twisted Leroy's arm savagely and shouted at the other man.

Billy then kicked the three troublemakers out of the room and the "musician" proudly took his book back and resumed his nerve-jangling chords.

"What was the fight about?" asked Larry.

"This Piano Nut. . ."

"This piano nut is from South America," Billy said.

"He doesn't speak much English and he bought that book on how to learn and I guess he doesn't want to get separated from it. I could talk to him because both the women I married speak his language."

"I told both those guys if they didn't cool it, they'd find themselves in 51 so fast it would make their heads swim. . ."

Larry nodded his head wisely but I was still in the dark:

"What the hell is 51?"

Everybody tried to answer at once:

When patients are brought into Kings County in a violent state because of liquor, drugs or madness, they are laced into straitjackets, put under heavy sedation and packed off to Ward 51 on the fifth floor for close confinement and supervision.

If they calm down, they are unbound and given the run of 51, under the watchful eyes of its muscular and highly trained attendants.

## Room for Violent Patients.

Because Ward 51 must have room to handle violent patients as they are hauled in off the streets, inmates who show improvement are quickly transferred downstairs.

Patients generally go from 51 to Ward 33. Ward 33 usually gets men who come into the hospital and who are not exactly violent, but who might yell become dangerous. Ward 31, into which I had been admitted, gets the calmest of the lot. The children's ward is on the first floor.

A reasonable system, but two factors keep it from working:

- The hospital is overcrowded.
- People are shunted from ward to ward as punishment.

When the children's ward is full, the overflow goes to Ward 31.

But Ward 31 sometimes has more than it can handle and the surplus is passed on to Ward 33. And since 51 also becomes overcrowded, patients are sometimes shipped downstairs too soon.

If a patient gets violent on any of the lower floors, he is sent to 51. A man may also go to 51 for creating a disturbance, getting into a fight or even for giving a nurse some jip.

The punishment comes not from the ward itself, but from being surrounded by the most dangerous and disturbed men in the hospital.

## 'I'd Rather Be in Sing Sing.'

"I'd rather do time in Sing Sing than 51," said Billy, "and I've pulled enough time in both to know what I'm talking about."

I was eager to hear more about 51, but my name was called. The psychiatrist wanted to see me.

The doctor showed me into a tiny cubicle just large enough for a desk and two chairs. We sat down, but a woman came in and claimed the room. The psychiatrist apologized for thinking the cubicle was unoccupied and we moved to another, just as small, but even dingier.

Unlike the doctor who admitted me, this man did not introduce himself, but got things rolling simply by saying: "Now tell me, just what brought you here?"

I told him roughly the same prepared story I had given downstairs: That I was emotionally upset, had been drinking heavily and had severe problems.

## Asked About Voices, Visions.

Then he wanted to know if I heard voices, saw things or felt that everyone was against me. I said no. When he asked me whether I sometimes felt the walls were closing in on me, or whether I ever experienced periods of extreme disorientation, I also said no.

He asked me the meaning of several proverbs, including "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush," and "People in glass houses should not throw stones."

I defined the proverbs briefly and rationally. This word game was the only test vaguely resembling a psychological examination that I received while in Kings County.

This was a 20-minute interview.

On the basis of interviews such as this—some shorter, some longer—a patient is committed to a state institution or is turned out to the free world.

## TOMORROW:

Visitors to Kings County locked wards suffer almost as much as the patients.

**HEARNS** PHOTO COPY & RESTORING CENTER



**OIL PAINTINGS**

A most treasured possession of lasting beauty . . . rendered by fine artists from any old or new photograph, that you'll be proud to display in your home. A fine Gift! Satisfaction guaranteed.

from **19.95**

MAIL ORDERS FILLED  
Third Ave. at 140th St., N.Y.C. 49  
Phone LU. 8-4185

